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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from Phase 1 of an evaluation of the New York City Beacons initiative, a school-community-family partnership model initiated in 1991. Beacons are community centers within public schools that offer activities and services to people of all ages before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends. Research included analysis of the development and evolution of the initiative, and examination of how the concept has been implemented at individual sites. It involved two rounds of site visits to 39 Beacons in 1997-98, parent focus groups, participant surveys, and youth interviews. Overall, the Beacons have created safe havens for children and youth and provided many important services for children and families. Beacons have fostered positive youth development and leadership, helped youths avoid risky behavior, provided foster-care prevention services, and facilitated improved relationships between host schools and parent communities. There is variation across the 39 Beacons. Most have strong or exemplary programs in one or two of four essential areas (youth development programming, academic support and enrichment activities, parental involvement and family support, and neighborhood safety and community building), and acceptable implementation overall. Results are also presented on patterns of participation. (SM)

Evaluation of the New York City Beacons

PHASE 1 FINDINGS

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AED
Academy for Educational Development

Evaluation

of the

New York City Beacons

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Academy for Educational Development
with
Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago
Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health

1999

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is a nonprofit educational evaluation and technical assistance organization committed to addressing human development and educational needs in the United States and throughout the world. AED's School and Community Services department has a strong commitment to excellence and equity in education and to developing links between schools, families, and community-based organizations to increase educational and employment opportunities for youth across the United States. AED works with schools, school systems, families, and community-based organizations on comprehensive school and community improvement initiatives as well as programs addressing specific issues, such as HIV/AIDS education, middle-grades education, family involvement in education, school-to-work transition, gender equity, adolescent pregnancy prevention, and teen parenting. AED designs implements, and evaluates model educational programs; provides technical assistance to schools and school districts; and disseminates information on issues relevant to youth through conferences, seminars, and publications. School and Community Services' main office is located in New York City.

The Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago is an independent policy research center, the mission of which is to bring sound information, rigorous analyses, and innovative ideas to the debate about policies and practices affecting children and the families and communities in which they live. Chapin Hall is a national leader in policy and programming for youth and community development. **The Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health of the City University of New York** has worked extensively with community-based organizations and schools in New York City to promote the health and well-being of adolescents. The center has assisted community organizations, schools, and health and social service agencies to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions designed to improve the well-being of New York City's poorest neighborhoods.

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Acknowledgments

Evaluating a program as complex and ambitious as the New York City Beacons initiative is a major endeavor. This report describing the evaluation's Phase I findings reflects the effort and cooperation of many people at the Academy for Educational Development; the Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health; the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago; the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD); and the Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York, as well as staff, parents, and youth in the Beacons sites, schools, and lead community agencies.

Richard Murphy, former New York City Commissioner of Youth Services, searched both his files and his memory to recount the early development of the Beacons initiative. Former DYCD Commissioner Martin Oesterreich and Acting Commissioner Violet Mitchell also provided both valuable information and political support for the evaluation. We also thank the assistant commissioner for Beacons programs, Jenny Soler-McIntosh, for her willingness to help when data collection was slowed by the press of day-to-day operations.

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New York City
Fall 1999

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

This summary report presents the findings of an evaluation of the New York City Beacons initiative, a complex and ambitious model of school-community-family partnerships initiated in 1991. Beacons are community centers located in public school buildings, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on the weekend. The initiative is funded by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). The Beacons, with current funding at $36 million, is the largest municipally funded youth initiative in the United States.

The New York City administration initiated the Beacons in 1991 with $5 million of municipal Safe Streets, Safe Cities funding. The initiative originally enabled 10 community-based not-for-profit agencies to create school-based community centers as "safe havens" providing "safe, structured, supervised activities for children, youth and families"[1] in selected New York City neighborhoods. By 1998, the initiative had expanded to 40 Beacons and one "mini-site" (with 50% funding), and served more than 76,000 youth and 33,000 adults.[2] Over time, Beacons gained an increasingly broad base of political support and legitimacy as a focal point for neighborhood improvement efforts. In 1998, the New York City government doubled the initiative's funding. There are currently 76 Beacons, and each site receives a base grant of $450,000. Four additional sites will be funded in the coming year.

Individual Beacons are managed by community-based organizations and work collaboratively with school boards, their host schools, community advisory councils, and a wide range of neighborhood organizations and institutions. Individual Beacons offer children, youth, and adults a wide range of recreational, social service, educational enrichment, and vocational activities. Many Beacons also take an active role in the community by sponsoring activities—voter registration drives, cleanups, and cultural events and celebrations—to make the community a better place to live.

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York has provided ongoing support and technical assistance to the Beacons since shortly after the initiative's inception to help staff articulate the vision of the Beacons and make it a reality. YDI's assistance has included monthly meetings of Beacon directors; professional development activities for Beacon directors and staff; linkages to resources, such as funding and staff training opportunities; advocacy with public agencies to foster collaborative relationships with the Beacons; and grants to help individual Beacons develop in specific areas.

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[1] *First Request for Proposals to Operate School-Based Community Centers,* New York City Department of Youth Services, 1991.

[2] New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, FY 1998 annual totals of Beacon monthly participation reports.

The Evaluation

The evaluation of the Beacons seeks to provide information and insights to help improve both the initiative as a whole and individual Beacon programs in New York City. It also seeks to inform decision-making regarding the initiative and efforts to implement Beacons in other cities. It is a collaborative effort of the Academy for Educational Development, the Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health, and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

The evaluation is being conducted in two phases. Phase I comprised an analysis of the development and evolution of the Beacons initiative and an implementation study documenting and analyzing how the Beacon concept has been transformed into action at individual Beacon sites. Conducted in fall 1997 and spring 1998, it included two rounds of site visits to the 39 Beacons operating in 1997-98, focus groups with parents, a participant survey, and brief intercept—short, on-the-spot—interviews with youth. The site visits included interviews with numerous Beacon staff members as well as the lead agency supervisor and principals in the host schools. In addition, evaluation staff conducted focus groups with adult participants and observations of the Beacon environment and activities. Finally, evaluators interviewed the citywide creators and administrators of the Beacons. During Phase II, an outcome study in six sites will evaluate how the initiative has affected youth and their parents, the host schools, and the surrounding communities.

The remainder of this executive summary presents major Phase I findings, highlighting the accomplishments of the Beacons as well as issues requiring more attention. However, a few comments are in order to situate these findings in the context of the challenges facing the evaluation of complex community initiatives.

First, some variation in the breadth of implementation is to be expected when studying an initiative as complex and ambitious as the New York City Beacons. Several different "cohorts" of Beacons were included in this study—some that have been in operation since 1991 and others that started as recently as 1996. Some lead agencies had substantial prior experience in several core areas addressed by the Beacons, while others, though considered strong enough to be awarded the contract, had considerably more to learn about how to run a Beacon.

Second, all four focal areas of Beacon work—youth development programming, academic support and enrichment activities, parent involvement and family support, and neighborhood safety and community building—are emerging fields in which there are not yet clear objective measures to evaluate program quality. Third, the purpose of this phase of the evaluation was to obtain a cross-site view of patterns of implementation, not to judge the quality of individual Beacons. (The next phase of the evaluation, as noted above, will study the operation of six sites in depth and enable evaluators to examine the relationship between program characteristics and outcomes and to develop guidelines for making future judgments about program quality.) Finally, although there are a few Beacons that need more improvement than others to make full use of the potential of the Beacon concept, we saw nothing that suggested fundamental flaws in the Beacon vision or in the capacity of community-based organizations to make this vision a reality.

Summary of Findings

This section summarizes findings in terms of patterns of participation and the four core areas of Beacon programming, as stated above: youth development; academic support and enrichment activities; parent involvement and family support; and neighborhood safety and community building.

1. Patterns of Participation

The Beacons serve large numbers of youth and adults. In FY 1998, DYCD data showed that more than 77,000 youth (up to age 21) and 36,000 adults participated in the 40 existing Beacons and one mini-Beacon. To take a statistical "snapshot" of who participates at the Beacon, how often, and how long they have been attending, evaluators surveyed every participant who used the Beacons on two different days during the study. A total of 7,406 participants filled out the survey.

Accomplishments

- **Beacons attract participants of all ages.** According to the participant survey, 24% of participants are under 12 years old; 24% are between the ages of 12 and 14; 25% are between 15 and 18; 7% are 19 to 21; and 20% are over 21 years old.

- **Many participants attend Beacons frequently**. Almost a third (30%) of participants surveyed reported attending between five and eight times in the previous two-week period, and almost half (45%) reported attending more than eight times in that same period.

- **Substantial proportions of adolescents participate over several years**. Well over a third of participants (38% of 12–14-year-olds, 42% of 15–18-year-olds, and 37% of 19–21-year-olds) have been involved in the Beacon for at least three years. Approximately one-quarter have participated for at least four years (22% of 12–14-year-olds, 27% of 15–18-year-olds, and 28% of 19–21-year-olds). These figures compare favorably with those for some of the most respected youth-serving programs given in a national study.[3]

Areas needing additional attention

- **Number of teens at some Beacons before 6 P.M.** While Beacon adolescents make up more than 50% of the overall population, in some sites teens do not arrive in large numbers until after 6 P.M. This occurs for several reasons, which include teens' competing external commitments, school policies, and Beacon programming for teens. To reduce barriers to teens' earlier participation at the Beacons and protect them during the high-risk hours between the end of school and their parents' arrival home, two issues merit additional attention.

    - **Policies barring presence of older youth while younger children are on site:** Several schools or school districts specifically bar the presence of older youth while elementary

[3] M. A. Gambone and A. J. Arberton, *Safe Havens*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1997.

school-age children are on site. In these cases, the schools should explore structures that permit young people of all ages to participate at the same time.

- **More activities for teens during late afternoon:** Some Beacons do not offer enough attractive programs for teens at earlier hours. The Beacons need to develop more engaging programs to attract larger numbers of teens during the late afternoon.

➔ **Decline in participation of older girls**. The participant survey showed that while girls and boys younger than 12 attend in equal proportions, among 15–18-year-olds and 19–21-year-olds, boys outnumber girls by a two-to-one ratio. Beacons need to continue, and expand, their current efforts to develop programs that appeal to and retain older girls.

2. Youth Development Programming

The architects of the Beacons believed that youth programs should build on young people's strengths and foster their resiliency, viewing them as resources in their own development rather than as "problems to be solved." YDI, which provides ongoing technical assistance to the Beacons, focuses substantial attention on promoting positive youth development practices, which seek to provide youth with opportunities to (1) develop caring and trusting relationships, (2) participate in stimulating and engaging activities, (3) benefit from a continuity of adult support, (4) be challenged to grow by high expectations, and (5) connect with and contribute to their communities.[4]

Accomplishments

➔ **Youth activities and programs at most Beacons are consistent with the core tenets of youth development practice.**

- **A safe place:** The Beacons have clearly created a safe place for youth: the vast majority of youth (85%) reported that it was "always true" or "mostly true" that they felt safe at the Beacons.

- **A diverse array of activities:** Beacons provide a diverse array of activities for youth of different ages, ranging from basketball and karate to chess and computer instruction; conflict-resolution training to designing a skit for a peace vigil; and from newspaper production to leadership development. In almost three-quarters (73%) of Beacons, youth are also involved in organizing and carrying out activities and events.

- **Consistently interesting and engaging activities:** Evaluators who observed more than 100 activity sessions, using detailed guidelines, judged that the participants appeared to be both engaged by and interested in their activities in at least 90% of activities.

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[4] M. A. Gambone and A. J. Arberton, *Safe Havens*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1997.

- **High expectations:** In two-thirds (68%) of the sessions observed, staff encouraged youth to ask questions, and in three-quarters of activity sessions, staff gave young people feedback on their ideas (78%) and challenged youth to examine their thinking (74%).

- **Multiple opportunities to learn leadership skills:** Almost all Beacons (89%) have a youth council; 86% involve youth as volunteers within the Beacon; and 76% engage youth as paid program and administrative staff.

- **Community service activities:** Close to three-fifths of Beacons (57%) involve young people in a diverse array of community service activities, at least once monthly.

- **Experienced staff:** Beacons engage and retain experienced staff to work with youth. More than three-quarters (76%) of Beacon staff have more than three years' experience working with youth, and almost half (46%) have worked at the Beacons for more than three years. This staff longevity, unusual in the field of youth services, gives Beacon participants the opportunity to build close and lasting relationships with staff.

➔ **Beacons help youth avoid negative behaviors.**

- **Drug use:** Four-fifths of youth (80%) who took part in intercept interviews described the Beacon as either "very helpful"or "pretty helpful" in helping them avoid drug use.

- **Fighting:** Three-quarters (74%) of youth interviewed said that the Beacon was either very helpful or pretty helpful in helping them avoid fighting.

➔ **Beacons help youth develop positive behaviors and practices.**

- **Help in school:** Three-quarters (75%) of youth interviewed said the Beacon was either very helpful or pretty helpful in helping them do better in school.

- **Fostering leadership:** Almost three-quarters (72%) said the Beacon was very helpful or pretty helpful in helping them learn to be a leader.

- **Opportunities for volunteering:** Three-fifths (59%) said the Beacon was very helpful or pretty helpful in providing opportunities to volunteer in the community.

Areas needing additional attention

➔ **More attention to incorporating youth development activities and principles into informal activities**. In some sites, even apparently informal activities incorporate youth development principles, while at some Beacons, informal activities for adolescents appear to offer little more than a safe place to congregate or play. Without compromising young people's access to informal activities, more effort is needed by some Beacons to incorporate youth development practices so that the time adolescents spend at the Beacon truly supports their development.

3. Academic Support and Enrichment Activities

The Beacons' afterschool programs include activities designed to support and enhance participants' education. YDI's technical assistance in this area has included workshops and staff training to help Beacons develop educational enrichment opportunities, as well as a handbook on literacy-based afterschool programming and grants to enable Beacons to undertake thematically based youth activities. A special focus of YDI's technical assistance has been the use of themes for framing literacy activities.

Accomplishments

- **Extensive homework help**. The Beacons' educational support activities provide thousands of elementary and middle school students with the opportunity to complete their homework in a quiet environment with additional support from adults, often professional staff. Nearly all Beacons (92%) offer homework help, and more than half (58%) also offer individual tutoring when needed.

- **Educational enrichment activities that help develop new skills and capacities**. Almost all the Beacons (95%) offer other kinds of educational enrichment activities beyond homework help. These activities enable young people to learn new skills and experience themselves as capable learners in settings other than school. In three-quarters of the Beacons, participants can join reading groups (76%) or engage in writing projects (73%), including creative writing and student publications, such as a community newspaper researched and written by youth. More than half the Beacons (56%) reported organizing their academic activities around themes.

- **Contact with schools and families on academic issues**. Two-thirds of Beacons reported reviewing students' report cards and test scores, and roughly half the Beacons reported that their staff prepared periodic written assessments of student progress to share with parents. More than half of Beacons reported some form of communication between their staff and participants' classroom teachers.

Areas needing additional attention

- **More attention in some Beacons to educational enrichment**. In the small proportion of Beacons where educational programs are limited to little more than homework assistance, more attention is needed to develop a broader array of educational enrichment activities that stimulate and challenge participants and help them discover their own learning capacities.

- **More contact with school staff**. While it was encouraging that more than half the Beacons reported communication between their academic staff and the participants' daytime teachers, more communication between Beacon staff and classroom teachers would be useful in the remaining Beacons. This will require effort on the part of both Beacon and school staff.

4. Parent and Family Involvement and Support

As neighborhood centers, the Beacons offer activities and services for parents and other adults as well as activities for children and youth. In many Beacons, activities reflect requests of parents in response to Beacon-conducted surveys. In focus-group discussions with over 225 parents and other community members, participants described the tremendous positive impact of the Beacons on their lives and that of their children as well as on their communities and schools. In addition, the Beacon has provided space to community organizations to offer additional activities and services.

Accomplishments

- **An array of adult activities**. Most Beacons offer parents and other community adults a variety of classes and activities that respond to their particular interests and needs. The three areas attracting substantial numbers of adult participants are educational activities, sports and recreational activities, and culturally specific programming.

- **Adult education**. Adult education opportunities at the Beacon, which can be found in nine out of 10 sites (87%), are anchored by programs offered in cooperation with the New York City Board of Education, including GED preparatory classes and basic literacy and ESL classes.

- **Support for parental employment**. Many focus-group participants testified to the importance of the Beacon's provision of free afterschool child care in allowing them to work or continue their education or employment training. Many female participants indicated that, without the Beacon, they would be forced to leave their employment, since their wages were insufficient to afford babysitting. Participants also described the peace of mind of knowing that their children were not home alone but were receiving help with schoolwork and were involved in safe activities after school.

- **Opportunities to volunteer**. Three-quarters of Beacons (74%) reported using adult volunteers. Several parents in the focus groups reported that their volunteer commitments led to employment at the Beacon. Even adults working at the Beacon without pay reported that the opportunity to volunteer contributed to their feeling closer to their children and more connected to the neighborhood.

- **Intergenerational activities**. Most Beacons offer regular intergenerational activities and events to bring families together, often in the context of wider community celebrations. Three-quarters of Beacons (76%) reported holding intergenerational activities at least several times a year, and almost one in four Beacons (24%) reported including these activities on a continuing basis. Some Beacons also offer parent-child computer classes.

- **Support for families**. Two-thirds (67%) of Beacons provide specific support to parents, either through parent counseling or parent support groups. In 16 sites (40%), Beacons provide support to families struggling with social and emotional problems through the inclusion of preventive service programs under the authority of the Administration for Children's Services. The integration of these foster-care prevention programs into the Beacons is consistent with leading

policy in this area, which seeks to place these services at the community level and within community-based organizations.

➜ **Immigrant services**. Beacons in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants have developed services and activities specifically tailored to these new residents. These activities seek to help immigrants become a part of their new communities as well as maintain ties to their cultures. Several sites offer workshops on naturalization and related legal issues.

Areas needing additional attention

➜ **Reaching more parents**. As noted above, most Beacons offer a wide range of activities and services for parents and other adults as well as a variety of intergenerational activities to attract the parents of Beacon youth. Many Beacons are doing an admirable job of reaching parents and providing services that have a direct positive impact on their lives. In some communities, however, the Beacons, like other institutions, have difficulty overcoming parents' reluctance to come into the school building. Several sites have developed creative strategies for encouraging more regular parental participation in the Beacon; other sites would benefit by developing similar strategies to address the barriers to broader parent participation.

➜ **Increased male participation**. Among adult participants, women appear to outnumber men by large margins. Currently, most men come for sports, but focus-group participants (mainly women) suggested that more men might come if other kinds of activities were also offered.

5. Neighborhood Safety and Community Building

Many Beacons have become "safe havens" and serve as a site for organizing a range of community improvement efforts. Through their neighborhood-focused activities, many Beacons have created a sense of common interest and a stronger web of relationships among residents, Beacon staff, community service providers, and other neighborhood leaders.

Accomplishments

➜ **Improved security**. Beacons provide a protected location within the community by working with local police to patrol the area and by organizing neighborhood activities designed to reduce threats to community safety. One-third of the Beacons (33%) have secured additional police surveillance for the area around the Beacon; and two-fifths (39%) have arranged to have younger participants escorted from their schools to the Beacon in the afternoon. In addition, a small number of Beacons—five sites—provide escorts to take participants home at night.

➜ **A base for community problem-solving**. Most Beacons provide an organizational base for fostering community dialogue and problem-solving—for example Beacon members' participating in community board meetings or working to close an active incinerator in the neighborhood.

➜ **Community service activities**. Many Beacons engage local residents in community service activities designed to improve the neighborhood, such as advocating with the parks department

to renovate a public park or conducting a graffiti "paint-out." Almost three-fifths of Beacons (57%) reported involving youth in community service on at least a monthly basis, and one-third (32%) reported involving adults this frequently.

➔ **Family and community events**. Special Beacon-sponsored family and community events (e.g., a community Thanksgiving dinner, music and dance performances by youth) attract large groups across generations and cultures.

Areas needing additional attention

➔ **More active community advisory councils**. In some Beacons, the community advisory council is inactive or plays a very limited role in supporting the Beacon and linking it to the surrounding neighborhood. Beacons with no functioning community advisory council need to organize one, as specified in the DYCD contracts; Beacons with inactive community advisory councils need to focus more attention on organizing and sustaining active community participation in the Beacon.

➔ **Increased community-oriented activities**. In those Beacons with tenuous connections to the surrounding community, more attention is needed to develop activities that reach out into the surrounding neighborhood. Based on the experience of Beacons with stronger community connections, these activities are likely to bring more people into the Beacon and strengthen its contribution to the lives of both the neighborhood and individual Beacon participants.

Other Important Findings

➔ **Beacon-school relationships**. The mechanics and politics of sharing space has been the most difficult issue in the relationship between Beacons and their host schools. However, despite some tension between Beacon directors and principals over space issues, most have forged good working relationships: almost three-fifths of directors (59%) reported such relationships with the host school, with over a third (35%) reporting a "friendly working partnership" with the principal of the host school and nearly one-quarter (24%) reporting "cordial communication." However, four Beacons still lack access to rooms appropriate for private counseling sessions, and six Beacons have such small quarters that the lack of storage space has limited their ability to purchase equipment for their programs.

➔ **Health and health-related services**. Many Beacons have made connections with neighborhood resources and mobilized community institutions to offer an array of health and health-related services and activities, often in partnership with community providers. Almost three-quarters of the Beacons (72%) offer substance abuse prevention activities; more than half (56%) offer drug counseling; and almost a third (31%) have on-site self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Close to three-quarters of Beacons offer sex education (74%), and over two-thirds (69%) offer pregnancy and HIV prevention programs. More than one-quarter (28%) offer health services on site, and over two-fifths (44%) offer mental health services on site. More than three-quarters (77%) provide referrals for health or mental health services.

- **The role of the Youth Development Institute**. The evaluation findings confirm the substantial contribution to the Beacons initiative made by YDI's ongoing technical assistance. Two-thirds (66%) of directors reported attending most YDI meetings, and almost three-fifths (59%) reported participating in YDI professional development activities. Two-thirds of directors (68%) also reported frequently sending staff to training opportunities arranged by YDI. Almost all directors (95%) had positive views of YDI's assistance, with 57% describing it as essential to the success of the Beacons initiative and 38% describing it as very helpful.

- **Ongoing city support.** The New York City Beacons provides an excellent example of the "scaling up" of a targeted initiative to a comprehensive neighborhood improvement program. Crucial to this scaling up was the ongoing leadership and support, financial and otherwise, provided by New York City government under two administrations. This support not only provided funds to allow the initiative to quadruple in size; it also sent an important message to local-level practitioners about the importance of the initiative and the city's substantial commitment to developing the capacity of community-based organizations to provide opportunities for youth development and to address local community needs. What began as an ambitious and comprehensive initiative in 10 sites became institutionalized in city policy, with its own assistant commissioner, as one of the major ways that the city helps youth, families, and neighborhoods thrive.

Conclusion

In sum, the New York City Beacons initiative has largely lived up to the expectations of its architects. Neighborhood schools are now open evenings, weekends, and during the summer, and Beacons in these schools offer a rich and abundant variety of activities and services to residents of the surrounding community. Understandably, there is variation across the 39 Beacons studied as part of the first phase of the New York City Beacons evaluation. A small number of sites have implemented programs that fully develop the potential of the Beacon concept; the large majority have strong or exemplary programs in one or two areas and acceptable implementation overall; and a few sites are struggling to implement programs consistent with the rich conceptual Beacons framework. In some areas, Beacons have acknowledged the need for improvement and are working to strengthen their programs, and other areas are being addressed by the ongoing technical support provided by YDI and DYCD. Despite these variations, evaluation findings provide abundant evidence of the important role that Beacons are playing in many New York City communities.

I. Introduction

There was nothing in our community before the Beacon. There was a lot of violence and alcohol and drug abuse and people would be getting in trouble and hanging around. Once the Beacon opened, people came and started participating. It was the first time we had somewhere to go. (Beacon youth)

The motto that it takes a village to raise a child—well, the Bronx is the proof. The village of the Bronx is coming together here. (Beacon adult)

Overview

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the New York City Beacons initiative, a complex and ambitious model of school-community-family partnerships initiated in 1991. Beacons are community centers located in public school buildings, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on the weekend. The Beacons, currently funded at $36 million, is the largest municipally funded youth initiative in the United States.

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The Beacons initiative is funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Beacons are managed by community-based organizations and work collaboratively with school boards, their host schools and community advisory councils, and a wide range of neighborhood organizations and institutions.

Individual Beacons offer children, youth and adults a wide range of recreation, social services, educational enrichments, and vocational activities in four core areas: youth development programming, academic support and enhancement, parent involvement and family support, and neighborhood safety and community building. Many Beacons also take an active role in the

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[1] *First Request for Proposals to Operate School-Based Community Centers*, New York City Department of Youth Services, 1991.

[2] New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, FY 1998 annual totals of Beacon monthly participation reports.

community by sponsoring activities—voter registration drives, cleanups, and cultural events and celebrations—to make the neighborhood a better place to live.

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York has provided ongoing support and technical assistance to the Beacons since shortly after the initiative's inception to help Beacon staff articulate the vision of the Beacons and make it a reality. YDI's assistance has included monthly meetings of the Beacon directors; professional development activities for Beacon directors and staff; linkages to resources, such as funding and staff training opportunities; advocacy with public agencies to foster collaborative relationships with the Beacons; and grants to help individual Beacons develop in specific areas.

The Evaluation

The evaluation of the New York City Beacons seeks to provide information and insights to help improve the initiative as a whole and individual Beacon programs in New York City. It also aims to inform decision-making regarding the initiative as well as efforts to implement Beacons in other cities. The evaluation is a collaborative effort of the Academy for Educational Development, the Hunter College Center on AIDS, Drugs and Community Health, and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The Beacons evaluation is managed by YDI and supported by the Annie E. Casey and the Ford Foundations and the Open Society Institute.

The evaluation is being conducted in two phases. Phase I comprised an analysis of the development and evolution of the Beacons initiative and an implementation study documenting and analyzing how the Beacon concept has been transformed into action at individual Beacon sites. Conducted in fall 1997 and spring 1998, it included two rounds of site visits to the 39 Beacons operating in 1997–98, focus groups with parents, a participant survey, and brief intercept—short, on-the-spot—interviews with youth. The site visits included interviews with numerous Beacon directors and staff members (the coordinators for youth activities, academic support and enrichment activities, and parent, family, and community activities, as well as the family support coordinator in sites with foster-care prevention programs), and the community advisory council chair, lead agency supervisor, and the host school principals. In addition, evaluation staff conducted focus groups with adult participants and observations of the Beacon environment and activities. Finally, evaluators interviewed the citywide creators and administrators of the Beacons. During Phase II, an outcome study, currently under way in six Beacon sites, will evaluate how the initiative has affected youth and their parents, the host schools, and the surrounding communities.

The remainder of this report presents major Phase I findings, highlighting the accomplishments of the Beacons as well as issues requiring more attention. However, a few comments are in order to situate these findings in the context of the challenges facing the evaluation of complex community initiatives.

First, some variation in the breadth of implementation is to be expected when studying an initiative as complex and ambitious as the New York City Beacons. Several different "cohorts"of Beacons were included in this study, some that have been in operation since 1991, and others started as recently as 1996. Some lead agencies had substantial prior experience in several core areas

addressed by the Beacons, while others, though considered strong enough to be awarded the contract, had substantially more to learn about how to run a Beacon.

Second, all four focal areas of Beacon work—youth development programming, academic support and enrichment, parent involvement and family support, and neighborhood safety and community building—are emerging fields in which there are not yet clear objective measures to evaluate program quality. Third, the goal of this phase of the evaluation was to obtain a cross-site view of patterns of implementation, not to judge the quality of individual Beacons. (The next phase of the evaluation, as noted above, will study the operation of six sites and enable evaluators to examine the relationship between program characteristics and outcomes and develop guidelines for making future judgments about program quality.) Finally, although there are a few Beacons that need more improvement than others to make full use of the potential offered by the Beacon concept, we saw nothing that suggested fundamental flaws in the vision of the Beacon nor in the capacity of community-based organizations to make that vision a reality.

Organization of This Report

The rest of this report presents a description of the Beacon and a summary of major evaluation findings regarding patterns of participation at the Beacons; Beacon programming in the four core areas; and other important findings, including relationships with host schools, health and health-related activities at the Beacons, and the roles of YDI and the city government in fostering this initiative. Each section contains a brief introduction, a description of key findings, and a summary discussion. Quotations illustrating participant and staff opinions about the Beacons are contained throughout the text. The boxes on the following pages contains a brief history of the initiative.

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The Beacon provides a safe place for children to go, which reduces my stress as a parent. (Beacon parent)

The Beacon is multicultural and they involve everybody. My daughter used to say "this Chinese girl" or "this black girl." Now she says, "this girl." (Beacon adult)

Here we can learn to be proactive. We can say this is what we want to do and figure out how we can do it. (Beacon youth)

The Beacon is open on Saturdays. It does barbecues, talent shows, plays, and we get to know everybody in the neighborhood. (Beacon adult)

We're lucky that with the Beacon our kids can take a trip to a campus upstate. You should have seen our kids playing in the leaves. My children love to star watch, but you can't do that in Brooklyn. (Beacon adult)

A Brief History of the Beacons: From Neighborhood Initiative to City Policy

The New York City Beacons provides a striking example of the "scaling up" of a targeted initiative to a comprehensive neighborhood improvement program. The Beacons were initially conceived of as part of a comprehensive neighborhood-focused strategy recommended by a mayoral commission on drug abuse. The commission's report called for school-based community centers in neighborhoods hard hit by substance abuse and its related problems. Since its inception in 1991, the initiative has grown from a $5 million to a $40 million dollar initiative, from 10 to 76 sites (with four more to be opened in 1999).

Start-up. The New York City Department of Youth Services (DYS) implemented the new initiative as the centerpiece of the department's efforts to support the healthy development of youth before they became involved with drugs and violence. Originally, 10 centers were planned, each funded at $1 million annually, but the anticipated funds were halved. Rather than cut the number of centers, the commissioner of youth services reduced the budget for each center to $500,000 because he wanted the initiative to be viewed as a new way to address the needs of youth at the neighborhood level, not as a handful of demonstration programs.

The first request for proposals (RFP) in 1991 called upon youth-service providers to establish "safe havens for community residents to avail themselves of social services, recreation, educational and vocational activities" and to "provide an attractive and creative mix of programs . . . as the centerpiece of an effort to reduce drug use in especially hard-hit neighborhoods." The neighborhoods were selected in collaboration with the police department; criteria included a high incidence of youth crime involving guns and drugs. However, while the Beacons began as part of a drug- and crime-prevention strategy, the approach was always firmly geared to strengthening the neighborhoods served by the new centers.

Under DYS procedural regulations, only community-based organizations (CBOs) could apply to become the lead agencies for the new centers. Beyond this institutional constraint, the initiative also represented a substantial commitment to developing the capacity of CBOs to provide opportunities for youth development and to address local community needs. The Board of Education had endorsed the new initiative but since funds were to be distributed to community-based organizations rather than schools, the city's educational leaders played no active role in the development and selection of the first Beacons. The RFP did not specify the schools in which the new centers were to be based, and the CBOs applying for funds were not even required to have formal agreements with schools in advance of submitting their proposals.

DYS began work immediately on building collaborative agreements with other city agencies that could augment the base funding each center received. They hoped that these agreements would help fill the gap left when the projected funding level for the new centers was cut in half. Many of these negotiations yielded positive results, including an agreement that brought in substantial funding for community-based foster-care prevention services to be integrated into the centers serving areas of high need.

Almost as soon as the 10 new centers opened their doors, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) of the Fund for the City of New York began providing technical assistance to the new Beacons, supported by independent foundation resources. YDI staff saw the Beacons as an opportunity to support the largest municipally funded youth development initiative in the country. In addition, they knew that the initiative far outstripped the size and complexity of any prior youth or neighborhood project, and, along with the initiative's architects, they wanted the new centers to be seen as the first of many yet to come. Both the city and YDI understood that the new centers would need support and technical assistance in order to succeed and that if the centers foundered, the chance for such a substantial commitment of resources would not come again.

Continuation, Expansion, and Support of the Beacons. Even as the first 10 contracts were being negotiated, plans for the second round of centers were under way. The idea of using the school as a neighborhood center caught on, and the number and quality of the proposals submitted for the first round of funding indicated that there was enough demand and organizational capacity to sustain additional centers. Finally, the initiative, which called for "school-based community centers," had found a name—Beacons—that effectively communicated the underlying concept.

The second round of funding permitted the addition of 11 sites. Two new criteria for selecting the sites were added: a high incidence of child neglect and abuse and a concentration of new immigrant populations. Although the second RFP called for essentially the same program, this time the schools in which the new Beacons were to be based were named. The principals of the named schools and their respective community school superintendents were invited to submit lists of priorities to be considered in evaluating the proposals and to meet with bidders and give feedback on proposals to the Interagency Coordinating Council (representing all city agencies working with youth), which was evaluating the proposals.

With 21 sites in operation, the Beacons gained credibility as more than a demonstration project, and in 1993, the city added funds to support 16 more sites, raising the total to 37, with at least one Beacon in each of New York city's 32 community school districts. In 1996, after the original three-year contracts had expired, all 37 sites were required to reapply. When the new contracts were issued, three new sites were added, bringing the total number of Beacons to 40. City council members from different areas had begun requesting Beacons in their districts, reflecting a broadening base of political support and an appreciation of the Beacons' potential as focal points for neighborhood improvement efforts. At the beginning of his 1997 reelection campaign, the mayor proposed adding 10 more Beacons. By the time the budget process ended, the city government had increased funding to permit the initiative to double in size.

There are currently 76 Beacons, and each site receives a base grant of $450,000. Four additional sites will be funded in the coming year. The Beacons, with current funding at $36 million, is the largest municipally funded youth initiative in the United States.

DYS not only provided funding to the Beacons, but also monitored their adherence to departmental regulations and contractual obligations and provided technical support to help the Beacons negotiate the complexities of space rental agreements and collaborations and subcontracts. In 1996, DYS was merged with the Community Development Administration to form the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). In 1997, the DYCD commissioner named an assistant commissioner for Beacon programs. This step both acknowledged the importance of Beacons as a city function and provided additional support in trying to link Beacons to other departmental and governmental initiatives.

Thus, what began as an ambitious and comprehensive initiative in 10 hard-hit neighborhoods has gained widespread legitimacy, broadened its political base, and quadrupled in size to become institutionalized in city policy with its own assistant commissioner, as one of the major ways that New York City helps neighborhoods and their residents thrive.

II. The Beacon Context: Communities, Schools, and Lead Agencies

The architects of the Beacons understood that each center would be unique, the product of the experience and commitment of the lead agency and the staff it hired to develop the Beacon, the schools that play host to the Beacons, and the community's strengths and resources, as well as its preferences and needs for services and activities. This section describes the three key elements that make up the Beacon context: the community, the school, and the lead agency.

Beacon Communities

The first 10 Beacons were created in neighborhoods selected in collaboration with the police department, with criteria including high incidence of gun- and drug-related youth crime. With the second and third rounds of funding, two new criteria for selecting sites were added: a high incidence of child neglect and abuse and a concentration of new immigrant populations. By 1996, at least one Beacon had been started in every one of New York City's 32 community school districts. Despite variations in the neighborhoods in terms of the original selection criteria, the communities served by the Beacons all face problems associated with unemployment, underemployment, poverty, gangs, substance abuse, and crime. They also possess local assets on which to build. In evaluation interviews, director after director cited community residents' diversity, energy, and commitment to the neighborhood.

In this report, we view the Beacon "community" as primarily the neighborhood surrounding the host school. Although the Beacons are open to anyone over the age of five, most Beacon participants come from the immediate vicinity of the host school. For example, roughly three-quarters of youth (ages 10–19 years old) interviewed during the evaluation reported that they could walk the distance between the Beacon and their home in 10 minutes or less.

Beacon Schools

In general, the host schools were selected primarily for their geographic location in communities selected to receive Beacons rather than for their educational characteristics. Under the first request for proposals (RFP), the lead agency could select a school in the designated area with which it wanted to work, but subsequent RFPs have identified both the neighborhoods and specific schools where the Beacons were to be created. While many Beacon participants attend the host school (roughly two-thirds among those in the age-group served by the school), a substantial proportion of young people at the Beacon attend other schools in the neighborhood, including a small proportion who do not attend public schools.

The Beacons are not, in and of themselves, a school reform initiative and have not been charged in the RFPs to undertake efforts to actively work to improve their host schools. Instead, the Beacons seek to support the educational progress of participants through their academic support and enrichment programs. Nevertheless, these schools are an important context for the Beacon, since they shape the lives of the youth they serve and the neighborhoods in which they are located.

The schools in which the Beacons are located vary considerably. At the one end, a third of the schools have principals who have served for more than five years, some are engaged in innovative restructuring efforts, and several have been awarded Annenberg funds to develop ambitious arts-in-education programs. At the other end of the spectrum, because the Beacons are located in neighborhoods hard-hit by substance abuse and crime—conditions associated with poverty—many of the Beacons' host schools are beset with difficulty, as summarized below:

- According to the New York City Board of Education Performance Report for 1996–97, nearly two-thirds of Beacon schools (64%) are ranked in the high- or highest-need category. In 34 Beacon schools, at least 70% of students are eligible for federally funded free lunches. In one Beacon school, more than 25% of students have limited English proficiency.

- Based on student performance on standardized English language arts tests, six Beacon schools were rated "below average" and 10 were rated "far below average" when compared to schools in their need category, according to the New York City Board of Education's Division of Assessment and Accountability.[3]

- As of 1998, six Beacon schools are designated SURR schools (Schools under Regents Review) and three Beacon schools are in the Chancellor's District.[4]

- More than one Beacon school in four has experienced moderate to severe leadership instability, with one school having 11 principals during a four-year period.

These conditions form the setting in which the Beacons work and often strain the relationship between schools and their surrounding communities. However, in some schools, including those most in need of improvement, the Beacon has become a partner for positive change. The relationship between the Beacons and their host schools is discussed later in this report.

Lead Agencies

City government officials devoted considerable attention to the selection of lead agencies to manage and operate the Beacons. Because the Beacon approach was new and untested, it was important to select lead agencies that could rise to the challenge of building a strong set of programs addressing the needs of residents of all ages. At the same time, these agencies had to develop and sustain relationships with the host school and a range of local community organizations, institutions, and

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[3] New York City Board of Education's Division of Assessment and Accountability, *New York City Public Schools Performance Report, 1996–1997.*

[4] The SURR schools are deemed by New York State educational authorities to be "farthest from meeting the state performance standards or to offer a poor learning environment" and required to undergo a process of redesign and restructuring. Schools in the Chancellor's District have been removed from the authority of the community school board because of consistently inadequate performance and are administered by the New York City Board of Education.

agencies. The majority of the agencies contracted to run Beacons were well established (77% had been in existence for at least 20 years in 1997), thus bringing the Beacon into an existing network of supportive relationships. In addition, for the most part, the agencies selected to implement the Beacons in response to the first two RFPs had worked mainly in the neighborhood surrounding the Beacons. Of the lead agencies selected through the third RFP, however, the majority had worked primarily, though not exclusively, outside the neighborhoods served by the Beacon before receiving the contract.

In exploring the prior experience of the lead agencies, we asked the lead agency Beacon supervisors to describe the agency's range of work. The majority of lead agencies had substantial prior experience in providing services to both young people and adults, such as youth development and afterschool academic support and enrichment programming for children and adolescents, and educational and counseling work with adults. A smaller proportion of lead agencies described substantial prior experience in the areas of community safety and improvement. At least two agency directors reported that the challenge of operating a Beacon had moved the agency forward, encouraging them to take a broader view of the agency's mission.

Many Beacon lead agencies also operate programs in other locations, providing a range of supervision and support to all their programs. In addition to providing administrative and fiscal oversight for the Beacon contract, more than four-fifths of the directors (82%) reported that the lead agencies provided direct services to Beacon participants, and almost as many (74%) reported that their lead agencies provided additional staff to work at the Beacon.

The overwhelming majority of Beacon directors reported that their sponsoring agency also provided at least monthly support or supervision in four areas: general administration (87%), programmatic issues (91%), school relationship issues (91%), and working with the neighborhood (92%). In addition, more than 90% of directors reported that the lead agency either provided direct fiscal support or assisted with fundraising efforts, and nearly as many reported that the lead agency provided professional development for Beacon staff.

Summary

In brief, the Beacons are situated in widely varying communities, with a range of resources and challenges. They were chosen according to several criteria, including high incidences of gun- and drug-related youth crime, a high incidence of child neglect and abuse, and a concentration of new immigrant populations. Beacon schools were chosen for location rather than any educational characteristics, and in general reflect their neighborhoods—some are working hard to improve, while others are consistently among the most troubled in the city and, as such, often have strained relationships with the community served by both the school and Beacon. Lead agencies were, for the most part, well-seasoned and stable and introduced the Beacons to a network of resources.

III. Patterns of Participation at the Beacons

The next section of the report discusses patterns of participation at the Beacons, based on the results of a participation survey and intercept interviews with young people. In order to learn more about who was served by the Beacons and their patterns of participation, the evaluators conducted two day-long participation surveys at each site during fall 1997 and spring 1998. As participants signed in at the desk, they all were asked to fill out a brief form indicating their age, gender, zip code, and ethnicity, as well as the month and year they first attended the Beacon, whether any siblings or children were enrolled in the host school, and how frequently they had attended the Beacon during the previous two weeks. Participants who were already in the school building (and thus did not have to pass the sign-in desk) were sought out in activity sessions. A total of 7,406 participants filled out the survey form.

In addition, to learn more about the participation of youth in the Beacons, all participants filling out the survey who were between the ages of 10 and 19 were invited to participate in brief intercept—short, on-the-spot—interviews being conducted at the same time. Evaluators asked these young people whether they lived within 10 minutes' walking distance of the Beacon, what school they attended and what grade they were in, whether and which members of their family attended the Beacon, how frequently they attended different kinds of activities at the Beacon, why they liked coming to the Beacon, and how effective they found the Beacon in discouraging negative behaviors and promoting positive ones. A total of 1,363 young people participated in the interviews. While the sampling strategy was not designed to yield a scientifically representative sample, it did produce data from a broad cross-section of Beacon participants. The results provide a snapshot of who attends the Beacon, how frequently, and for how long, as well as why they come and what they appreciate about the Beacon's offerings.

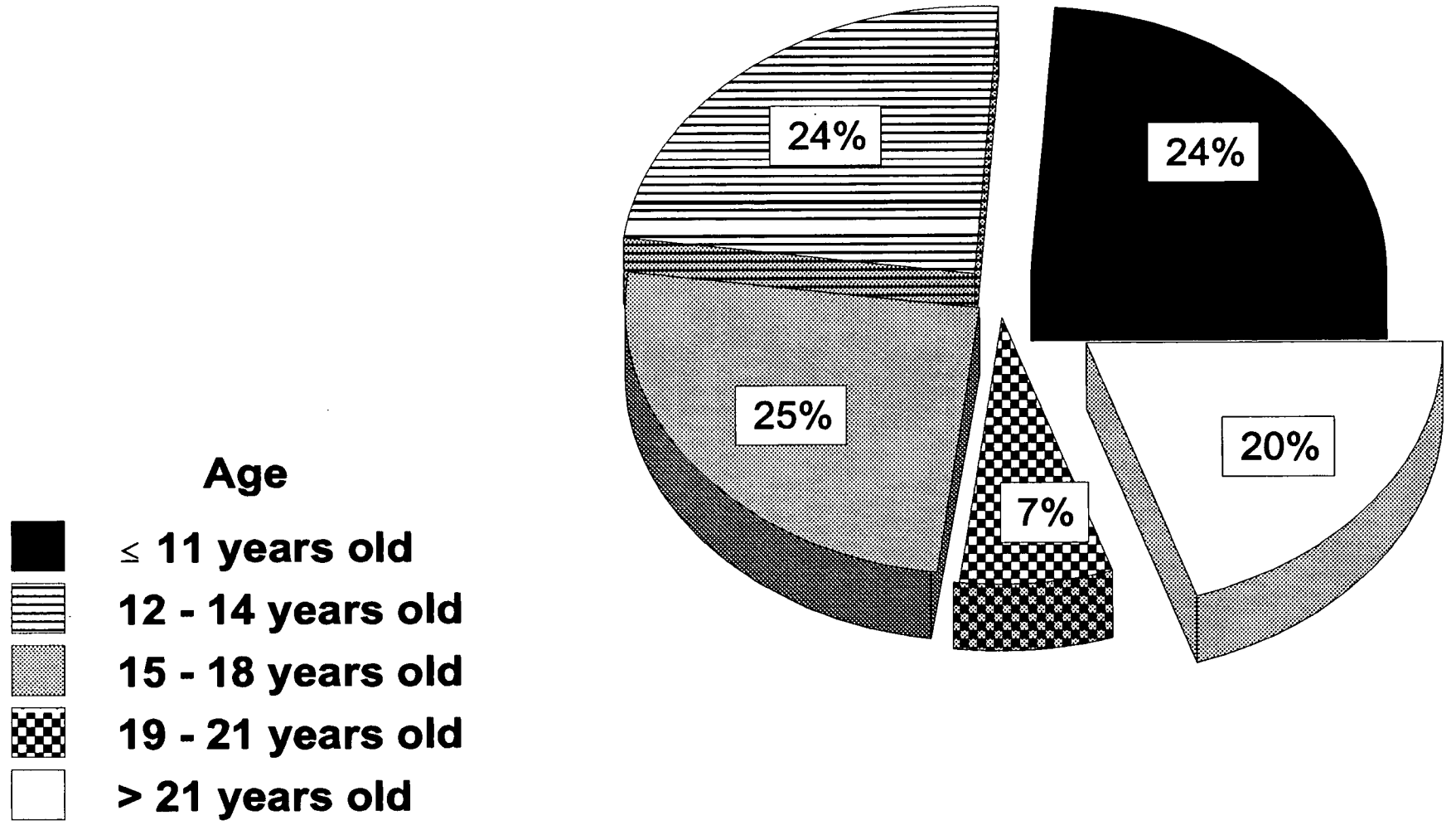
Overall, data showed that Beacons attract participants of all ages; most participants attend the Beacon frequently; participation of males and females changes as they get older; frequency of attendance also changes as participants get older; and a substantial proportion of participants have family members who attend the Beacon. These findings are discussed below.

Figure 1. Beacon participants, by age-group
Source: Participant survey (n = 7,406)

Age Range of Participants

Figure 1 shows the ages of participants who filled out the surveys. The population is divided roughly into quarters, with youth under 11 at 24%; 12–14-year-olds at 24%; 15–18-year-olds at 25%; and young adults 19 and over at 27%. The pattern of attendance by age varied slightly depending on the level of the host school (e.g., elementary or middle school). Specifically, Beacons located in elementary schools attracted slightly more elementary school–aged youth, while those located in middle schools attracted more middle school–aged youth. Almost three-quarters of participants (73%) lived in the immediate vicinity, reporting that they were able to walk to the Beacon in fewer than 10 minutes.

Figure 1. Beacon participants by age group



Source: Participant survey (n = 7,406)

Evaluators also observed variations over the course of the day as to when participants of different ages entered the Beacon. In most sites, elementary school children dominated the Beacon activities offered immediately after the end of the school day. In some cases, adolescents were also in the Beacon during these hours, but the majority of adolescents appeared after 6 P.M. We asked Beacon staff about this pattern and learned that in some sites, no adolescents were permitted until after the younger children had gone home. In at least one site, this policy was required by the local community school board. In other sites, space and staff limitations appeared to be the reasons underlying the later arrival of adolescents. Finally, staff pointed out that some teens had afterschool commitments outside the Beacon and only came to the Beacon once they had completed their other activities.

Figure 2. Frequency of participants' attendance at the Beacon
Source: Participant survey (n = 7,158)

Frequency of Attendance

For most participants, the Beacon is an important part of their routine activities. Figure 2 shows that nearly half (45%) of participants attended the Beacon more than nine times during the two weeks before the survey (or more than four days each week). Another third (30%) reported attending between five and eight times (or more than two days each week); only one-quarter (25%) of those participants surveyed had used the Beacon fewer than five times in the two-week period before the survey.

Figure 3. Frequency of attendance, by age-group
Source: Participant survey (n = 7,122)

Frequency of Attendance, by Age-group

Figure 3 indicates the frequency of attendance at the Beacon within different age-groups. Younger children (11 years old or younger) were most likely to have attended on an almost daily basis, as were younger adolescents (12–14-year-olds). This was consistent with the scheduled activities for younger participants, offered at most Beacons four or five times a week. More than half the older youth (those aged 15– to 18 and 19–to 21) still reported attending on a frequent basis (at least five times in a two-week period), although their participation appeared to decline steadily as they got older. Occasional attendance (one to four times per two-week period) may increase as participants enroll in specific Beacon classes or activities offered only once or twice a week, or as older youth participate in activities outside the Beacon.

Figure 4. Gender of participants, by age-group
Source: Participant survey (n = 7,316)

Figure 2. Frequency of participants' attendance at the Beacon during the past two weeks

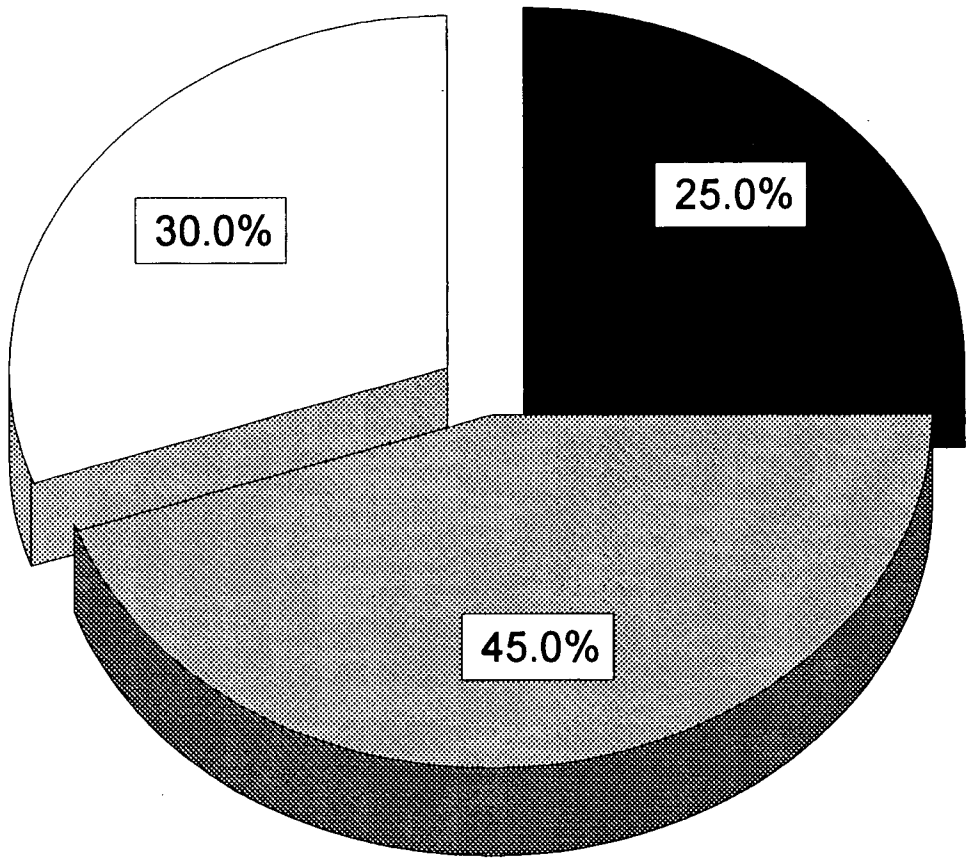


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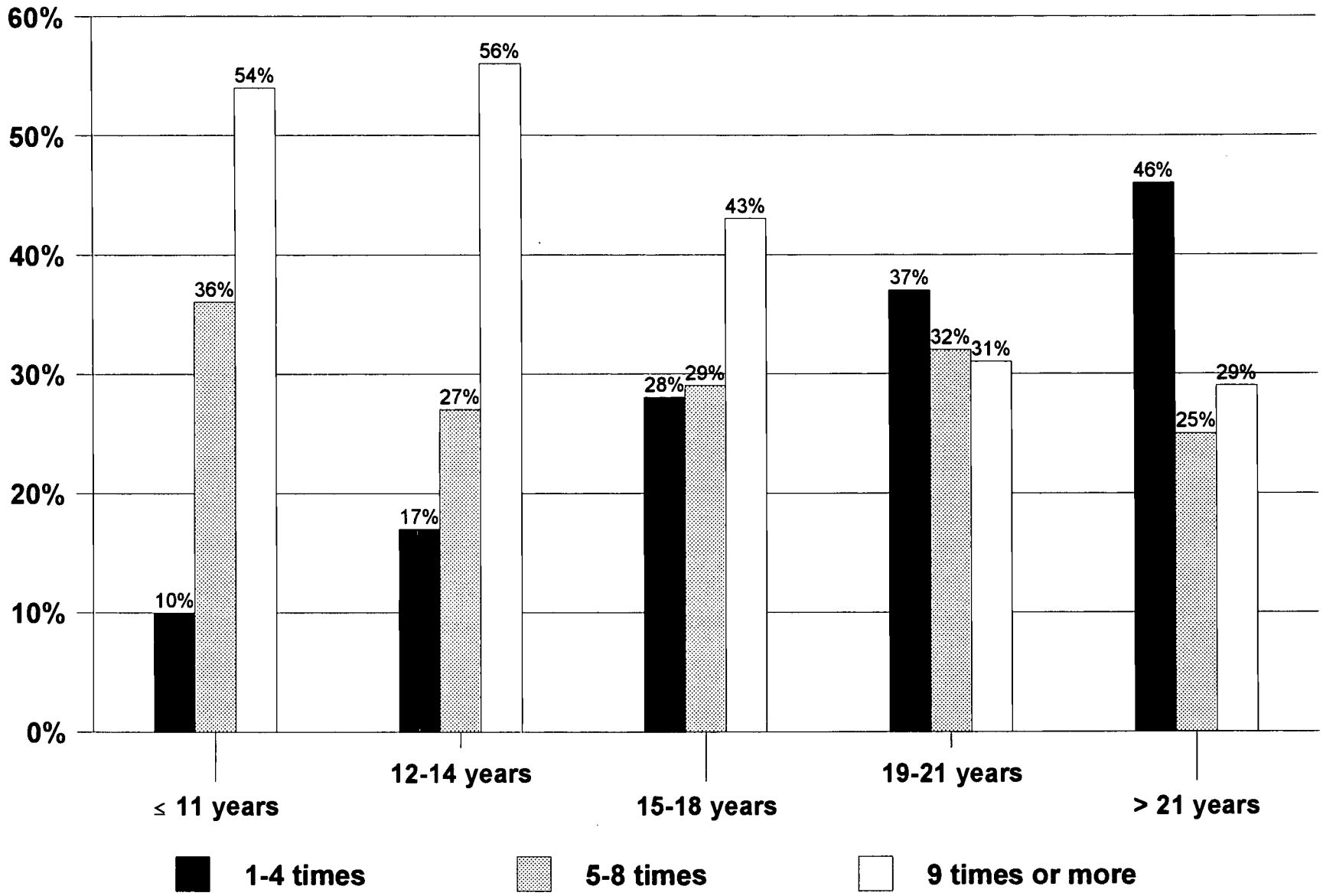
Figure 3. Frequency of Beacon attendance by age group during the last two weeks



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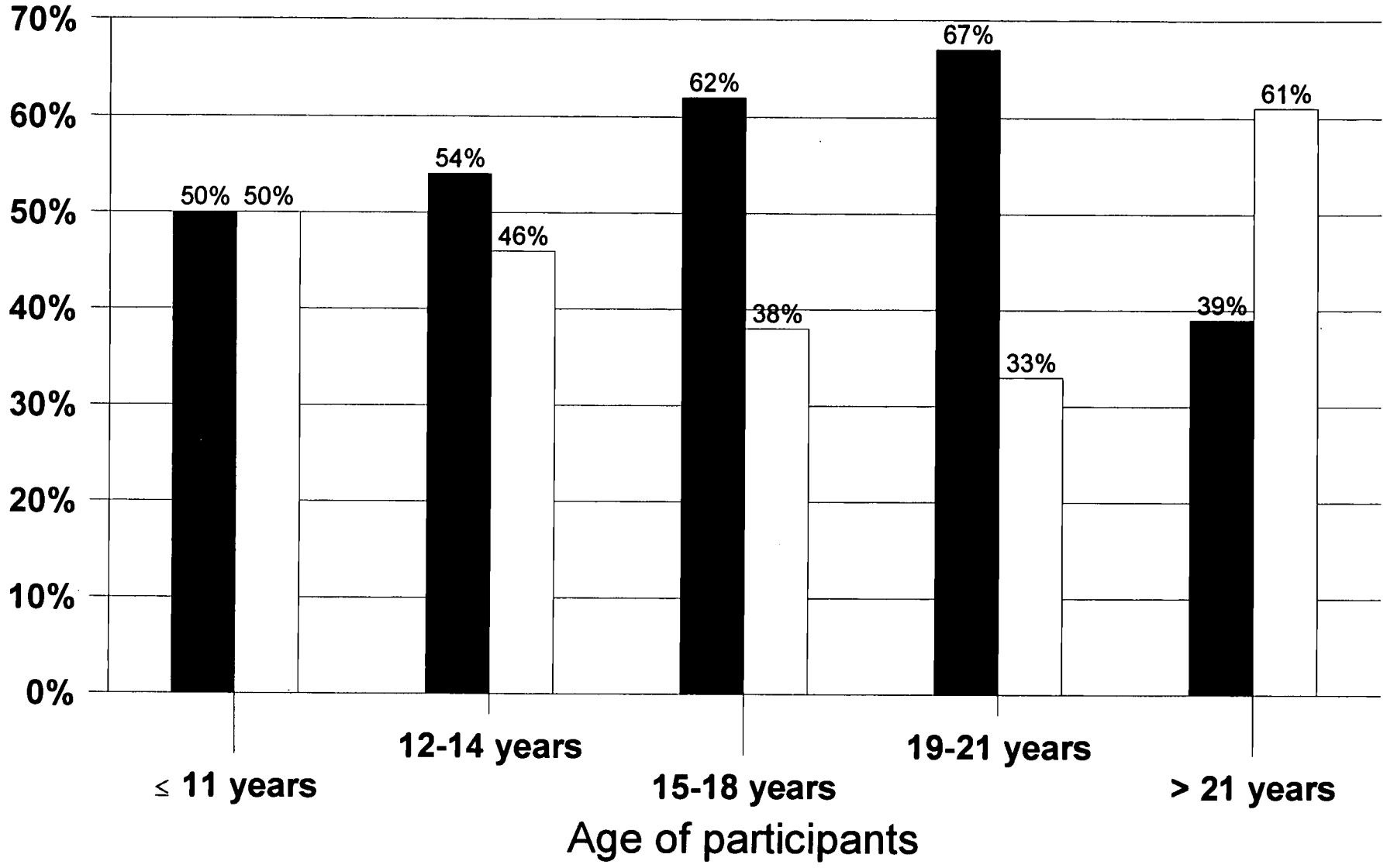


Source: Participant survey (n = 7,316)

Changes in Male-Female Participation

Slightly more than half (53%) of respondents to the participation survey were male. However, this roughly equal distribution of participants by gender varies by age, as is evident in Figure 4, which shows the different age-groups divided by gender. With the exception of the adult group, the participation of girls clearly declines as they get older. Among elementary school–aged children, boys and girls appear to attend in equal proportions, but by the time youth reach high school age, two boys participate for every girl attending the Beacon.

We asked Beacon directors and staff about this pattern, which we also noted in our observations of activities with young people. Several explanations were offered. In part, staff attributed the changing pattern to the fact that young women are more likely than young men to be kept home to assume child-care responsibilities. In addition, we were told by Beacon staff that it is more socially acceptable for young men to be out in the neighborhood after school. As a result, young women in general tend to socialize at each other's homes while young men are more likely to hang out together in a community location. This tendency for young women to stay closer to home may also be more prevalent in neighborhoods with high crime rates and where more recently arrived immigrant families have closer ties to traditional gender-based cultural patterns.

At the same time, the Beacons bear partial responsibility for the gradual decline of girls' involvement because there are fewer activities designed to address their preferences and needs than there are for young men. Some Beacons, in response to this pattern of diminishing participation by girls, have begun to create special programming for young women, including special athletic programs aimed at girls and girls' leadership groups. To strengthen their offerings, several Beacons have implemented curricula and programs designed by national organizations serving young women, such as Girls Incorporated.

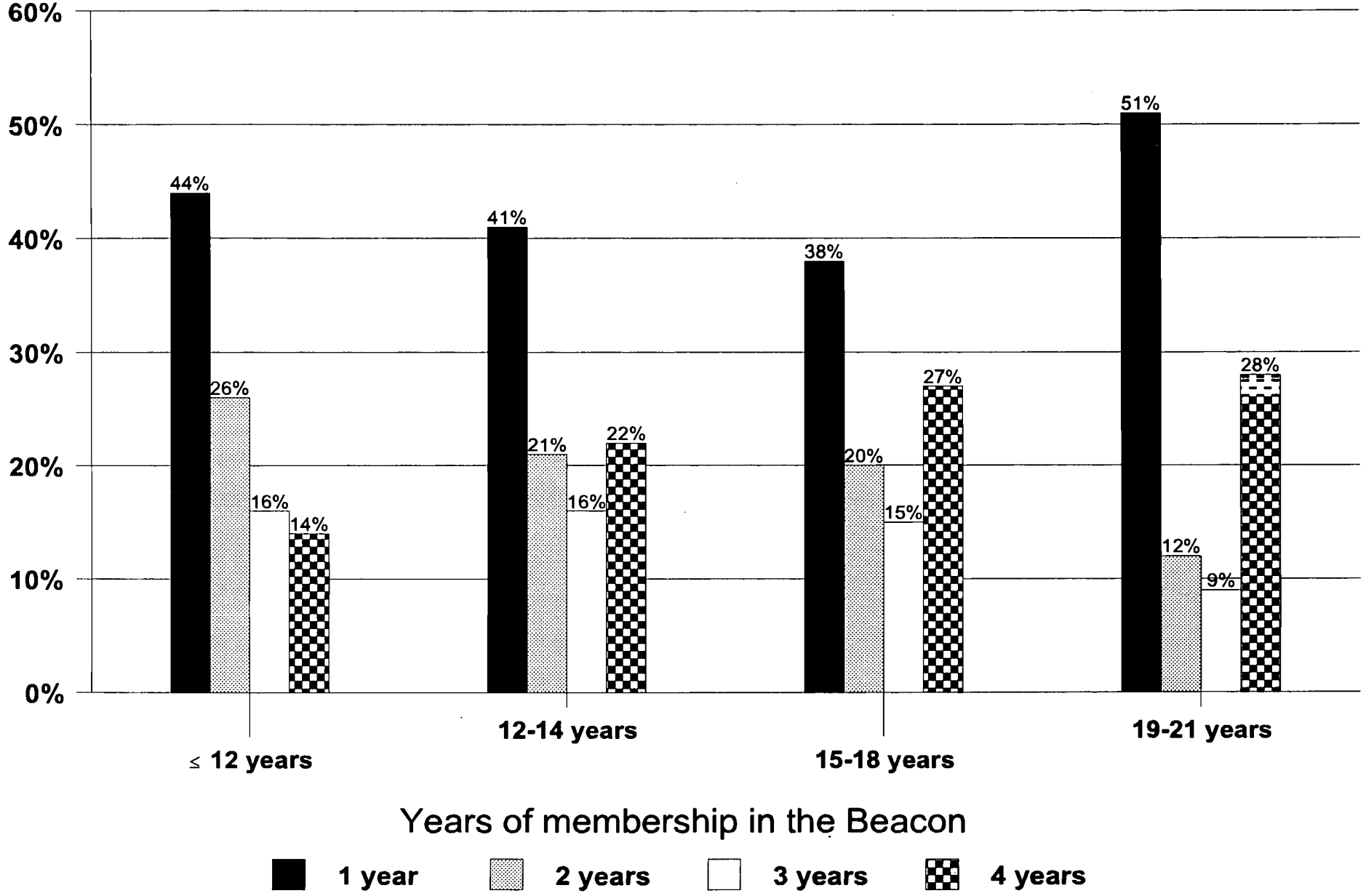
Figure 5. Years of membership of participants, by age-group
Source: Participant survey (n =6,709)

Longevity of Participation, by Age-group

Figure 5 examines the longevity of participation at the Beacon within different age-groups. While newcomers were the largest group at any age, it is interesting to note that the proportion of long-time participation increases among youth as they get older. At the elementary school level, the lower incidence of long-time participation (14% of these youth have attended for four or more years) may simply reflect the fact that some of these participants were not old enough to have participated for more than a year or two.

However, the fact that 22% of the middle school–aged youth, 27% of high school–aged youth, and 28% of the young adult group reported having attended the Beacon for four or more years reflects the capacity of the Beacons to retain a substantial portion of their adolescent participants for relatively long periods of time. More than a third of youth participants over the age of 11 had

Figure 5. Years of membership of participants by age group



Source: Participant survey (n =6,709)

attended the Beacon for three or more years at the time of the participant survey. These figures compare favorably with those of some of the most respected youth-serving programs in a national study.[5] The slight decline in the proportion of long-term participation among the young adults (19–21 years old) is offset by an increase in new participation, probably reflecting the beginning of their eligibility to enroll in general equivalency diploma (GED) preparation classes and a new interest in other adult-oriented activities.

Family Members at Beacons

Evaluators asked whether other family or household members attended the Beacon. Slightly more than half the male (52%) and slightly less than half the female (48%) respondents to the participant survey reported that at least one member of their family attended the Beacon. During the intercept interviews with youth (ages 10–19), evaluators asked which family members attended the Beacon. Half the interviewed youth reported having brothers or sisters at the Beacon. Extended family members were also mentioned: for example, 14% of youth reported having cousins at the Beacon. However, only 6% of youth reported that their mothers participated in Beacon activities.[6]

Discussion

The analysis of the survey data provides a cross-section of Beacon participation patterns. Youth from ages 6 through 18 attend in nearly equal proportions, joined by a somewhat smaller, though substantial, proportion of participants over the age of 19. Many participants join other family members (especially siblings) at the Beacon.

Most Beacon participants attend on a regular and even frequent (almost daily) basis, and a substantial proportion, particularly among adolescents, have been coming to the Beacon for several years. Participation patterns vary both by age and gender, with older participants (adolescents and adults) attending slightly less frequently than younger ones (children from ages 6 to 12), and girls attending in declining numbers as they get older. This phenomenon has been noted by the Beacons and DCYD, and several different efforts are under way to address the problem.

Also, while Beacon adolescents make up more than 50% of the overall population, in some sites, teens do not arrive in large numbers until after 6 P.M. This occurs for several reasons, which include teens' competing external commitments, school policies, and Beacon programming for teens. To reduce barriers to teens' earlier participation at the Beacons and protect them during the high-risk hours between the end of school and their parents' arrival home, two issues merit additional attention. First, the policies of several schools or school districts that specifically bar the presence of older youth while elementary school–aged children are on site need to be changed. Second, more engaging activities for teens are needed during late afternoon as part of an effort to attract larger numbers of teens during the late afternoon.

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[5] M. A. Gambone, A. J. Arberton, *Safe Havens*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1997.

[6] This may not include mothers who volunteer at the Beacon or participate in such special events as family nights and holiday celebrations.

IV. Youth Activities and Youth Development Programming

The Beacon RFPs called for the provision of an attractive and creative mix of programs for participants of all ages. The architects of the Beacons, however, had a vision of youth and their developmental needs that went beyond more traditional recreation programs and the increasingly common problem-focused prevention programs. Drawing upon their own experience and that of other developmentally focused professionals in youth-serving organizations, the creators of the Beacons have sought to provide youth development programming, which seeks to build on young people's strengths and strives to foster their resiliency, viewing youth as resources in their own development rather than as "problems to be solved."

Beacon youth activities and programs are designed to provide young people with the "protective factors" that the research on resiliency has identified as helping young people "develop a sense of autonomy, learn how to solve problems creatively, tolerate frustrations, persist in the face of failure, resist being put down, and forgive and forget."[7] These activities provide young people with opportunities to (1) participate in stimulating and engaging activities, (2) develop caring and trusting relationships, (3) benefit from a continuity of adult support, (4) be challenged to grow by high expectations, and (5) connect with and contribute to their communities.[8] These five program characteristics form the core of YDI's extensive work with the Beacons on youth development programming.

Evaluators observed 102 activity sessions to gain perspective on the Beacon's approach to serving young people and interviewed the Beacon staff who worked with youth in each of these activities. Although the activities we observed may not be entirely representative of the full range of offerings, they provide important insights into what the directors considered to be good youth development programming at their Beacons.

The observations were recorded using structured protocols, with evaluators noting the physical environment; the relationship and interaction between staff and youth; the purpose, presentation, and conduct of the activity; the extent to which participants were encouraged to think critically and were given feedback; and how interested and engaged the participants appeared to be. The discussion below reports our findings from these observations. In addition, evaluators interviewed staff to collect descriptive information about each activity. This included goals for the activity, whether young people had participated in planning it, whether the activity was based on a curriculum, and whether staff had participated in training on principles of youth development programming.

Overall, the findings showed that Beacons provide a diverse array of activities for youth of different ages; Beacons offer engaging and stimulating activities; Beacon activities reflect high expectations of youth; Beacons hire and retain experienced and caring staff; Beacons provide youth with

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[7] L.K. Brentro et al., *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service, 1990.

[8] M. A. Gambone, A. J. Arberton, *Safe Havens*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1997.

opportunities for contribution and leadership development; and youth enjoy coming to the Beacon and describe it as a safe place and as very helpful to them in a number of ways. These findings are discussed below.

A Diverse Array of Activities for Youth of Different Ages

Evaluators observed a wide and diverse array of activities available to Beacon youth, from basketball and karate to chess and computer instruction; from conflict resolution training and designing a skit for a peace vigil to newspaper production and leadership groups, such as Young Women's Institute and Youth on the Move. The primary categories of activities observed included educational enhancement (often computer-related), various forms of sports and recreation, arts and cultural activities (dance, in particular), career counseling and employment readiness, health education, and leadership development.

The kinds of activities available to participants varied according to their age, as did the way these activities were structured. In most Beacons, the majority of elementary school–aged participants were required to participate in homework help sessions combined with some other activity sessions; relatively few participants of this age-group were given completely free choice to participate in whatever they wanted. In most cases, activities were offered four or five days a week.

At the middle-school-level, almost half the youth still had at least a partially structured set of activity choices, usually incorporating some form of educational activity, but in almost a third of Beacons these young adolescents were able to choose activities freely. Some activities met several times a week, but more were offered on a drop-in basis than was the case for younger participants. Almost two-thirds of older adolescents were free to choose whatever activity they wanted, but one-fifth still participated in a homework support activity as part of their program.

Engaging and Stimulating Activities

Almost two-thirds (62%) of the youth staff interviewed and observed reported that their activities were based on a written preplanned curriculum, and two-fifths (40%) had involved youth participants in designing the curriculum and planning the activity. More than four of every five (87%) youth staff interviewed had attended some form of training on working with youth. As one staff member put it, "Our goal is to better the participants, to get them to develop awareness and have a better self-image."

While observing activities, evaluators sought evidence of participants' engagement and interest in what they were doing. They looked for signs of enthusiasm and positive interaction between participants and staff and among the participants, according to the activity being observed. In addition, evaluators noted when individuals appeared not to be paying attention or were involved in side conversations or other distractions. The evaluators assessment of the participants' engagement and interest is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Engagement and Interest in Activities

Observation	Most or all the time	Sometimes	Rarely or Never
Participants were engaged in activities.	98%	2%	O%
Participant interest in activities was high.	90%	7%	2%

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 because of rounding.
Source: Observations of Beacon activities

High Expectations for Youth

The expertise of the youth staff and their commitment to youth development practice were also reflected in the way activities were conducted. During observed activities, young people received feedback about their ideas and actions and were challenged to think and ask questions, as can be seen in Table 2. In one leadership group, for example, the staff person encouraged young people to examine their assumptions about the meaning of leadership and whom they perceived as leaders. As one staff member explained, "At our weekly rap session, we build vocabulary, leadership, and education at the same time. Their dialogue gets better over time, and they're not so afraid of the classroom anymore." Observers also reported frequent encouragement of both individual and group effort. "It's very demanding," one youth explained to the interviewer. "They require a lot, and they want to see us succeed."

Table 2: Ways that Beacon Activities Reflect High Expectations

Observation	Most or all the time	Sometimes	Rarely or Never	Not applicable
Participants received feedback about their ideas or actions.	78%	14%	6%*	1%
Participants were encouraged to think critically.	74%	8%	13%	5%
Participants were encouraged to ask questions.	68%	8%	13%	11%

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 because of rounding.
Source: Observations of Beacon activities

Experienced and Caring Staff

Findings suggest that the Beacons hire and retain experienced and caring staff, providing continuity in the lives of participants. More than three-quarters of interviewed staff (76%) had more than three years' experience working with youth, and almost half the staff (46%) had worked at the Beacon for more than three years. This longevity, remarkable in a field plagued by high staff turnover, gives young people at the Beacon the opportunity to build close and lasting relationships with staff.

Staff also understood their importance in the lives of Beacon youth. One staff person leading a sports activity stated: "These kids need father figures. They need male role models and a sense of family." The warmth and strength of these relationships were particularly visible in the interactions between staff and participants, and when, on repeated occasions, young people dropped by to update staff on personal news, to discuss personal issues, or just to say hello.

When asked what they liked most about their work at the Beacons, staff members responded:

> *The biggest thrill comes from seeing the youth succeed. We plant a seed and know that somewhere trees are now growing.*
>
> *For me, the best thing is actually getting to a young person who's given up on life and opening the doors and letting them know that they're important.*

Opportunities for Contribution and Leadership Development

The opportunity to contribute is a central component of youth development practice, and it is widely reflected at the Beacons. Evaluators asked about formal opportunities for young people to shape their experience at the Beacons, such as participation in a youth council, as well as informal opportunities to contribute, such as participation in planning events and activities. Beacon directors also described many examples of how the Beacons involve youth in planning and carrying out events and activities:

- 89% of the Beacons have a youth council.
- 86% involve youth as volunteer program and administrative staff.
- 84% involve youth in planning special events and activities.
- 76% engage youth as paid program and administrative staff.
- 73% give youth roles in organizing and carrying out Beacon events and activities.
- 50% include youth representatives in regular staff meetings.

In one youth council, for example, there were 31 members between the ages of 14 and 21, of whom 20 were active on a regular basis. The youth council coordinator described these young people as those who would normally be hanging out on the street. Instead, the group meets twice weekly to develop youth leadership and peer relationship skills, and gain competence to give back to the community. Youth have written proposals for small projects, organized a big brother/big sister program and a hot line, and conducted outdoor beautification activities and painted murals inside the Beacon.

In roughly half the Beacons, older youth can work as volunteers with younger youth, and in half of these sites, participants have progressed from volunteers to Beacon staff. In one site, older adolescents who had received training before taking on their roles as tutors, but who no longer lived in the Beacon's immediate surrounding area, traveled from outside the neighborhood to tutor

younger participants. These tutors were gaining a critical employment track record in addition to their stipends.

In addition to providing opportunities to contribute within the Beacon, more than half the sites (57%) offer opportunities for young people to engage in community service on at least a monthly basis. Fewer than one Beacon in five (16%) reported that youth were engaged in community service only once a year or not at all. This service has included such diverse activities as escorting senior citizens to the polls on election day, planting trees in the park across the street from the Beacon, and collecting food for needy families. In one site, for example, 75 young people, having noticed that the equipment and park area for young children were in disrepair, participated in painting and fixing up this local park, choosing "happy" colors rather than the institutional colors used by the parks department.

Youth Attitudes to the Beacon

In order to learn more about what the participants saw as the benefits of attending the Beacon, the intercept interviews asked young people an open-ended question probing why they came to the Beacon. The five most frequent answers were "I have fun here" (39%); "I learn new skills here" (16%); "I like the activities offered here" (16%); "I do important things here" (9%); and "My friends come here" (6%). Youth also described the Beacons as a safe place and as helpful to them in a number of ways, as described below.

A safe place

Although youth did not mention safety specifically in response to our specific question about why they came to the Beacon, when asked about it in another part of the interview, more than four-fifths (85%) said that they always or almost always felt safe at the Beacon. Although there were some respondents to the interviews who mentioned occasional disruptions in activities, evaluators neither learned of nor observed any of the kinds of violent behavior that is common in some schools. A few Beacons offer conflict-mediation training, but in others, the mediation and conflict-resolution skills are integrated into ongoing activities.

It also is interesting to note that while posted rules were not readily visible in many sites, most Beacons have succeeded in establishing a code of behavior and mutual respect that is consistently modeled and enforced. The behavioral expectations are reinforced by the attractive and engaging activities that make young people want to maintain their ability to participate. "Youth that were 'anti' and hostile now adhere to rules and regulations and are better able to deal with conflict," explained a staff member. In another site, the Beacon director explained her rules: "We tell the older teens that if they want to come play basketball in the afternoon, when most of the younger children are here, they are welcome to come, but no hats, no radios, no cursing, and no rough housing." Nor are the young people who attend the Beacons limited to those one might expect to be well behaved, the "good kids." As part of the intercept interview, young people were asked how many times they had cut class in the last four weeks; roughly one in six reported having cut class during that time period.

The sense of safety was particularly impressive given that the Beacons have opened the school to outsiders and mixed-age-groups, and that several Beacons have had to deal in very concrete ways with the issue of competing gang territory within the area served by the Beacon. As one staff member explained: "The Beacon allows young people to remove the territorial mind-set. . . . When they're in the Beacon, the focus is on the activities, not where the activities are or who runs them."

Young people describe the Beacon as helpful

As part of the intercept interviews, young people were asked to rate the Beacon's effectiveness in helping them avoid certain negative behaviors, including drug use and fighting, and in helping them behave in certain positive ways, including doing better in school, volunteering in the community, and developing leadership qualities. Figures 6 to 10 show the distribution of responses to these questions.

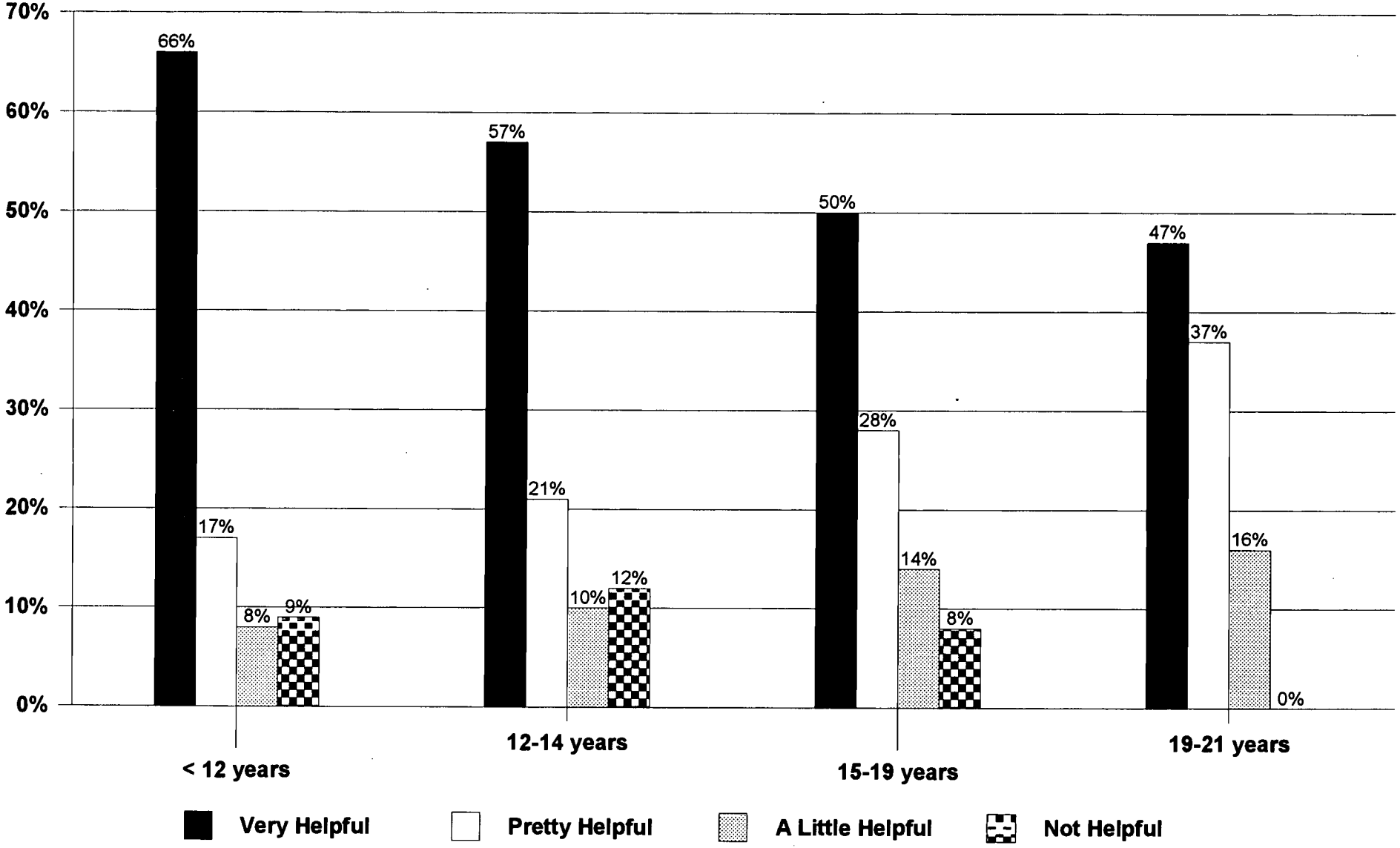
Figure 6: Helpfulness of Beacon in "avoiding drug use," by age-group
Source: Intercept interviews with youth, n = 658

One of the central concerns that motivated the creation of the Beacons was helping young people avoid drug use. Figure 6 shows the response of young people when asked about the role of the Beacon in this area. Four-fifths of youth (80%) who took part in intercept interviews described the Beacon as either "very helpful"or "pretty helpful" in helping them avoid drug use. It is interesting to note that while the "very helpful" responses decreased slightly as youth got older, the "pretty helpful" responses increased. (It is not clear whether this reflects a slight decrease in the actual perceived helpfulness of the Beacon or a tendency of youth to be less enthusiastic in their endorsements in general as they get older.) Overall, the most positive assessment of the Beacon's help in this area was among the under-12-year-olds and the 19–21 year olds (83% and 84% combined positive responses), with the 12–18-year-olds slightly less positive in their views (78% combined positive responses).

Figure 7. Helpfulness of the Beacon in "learning to avoid fighting," by age-group
Source: Intercept interviews with youth, n = 1,342

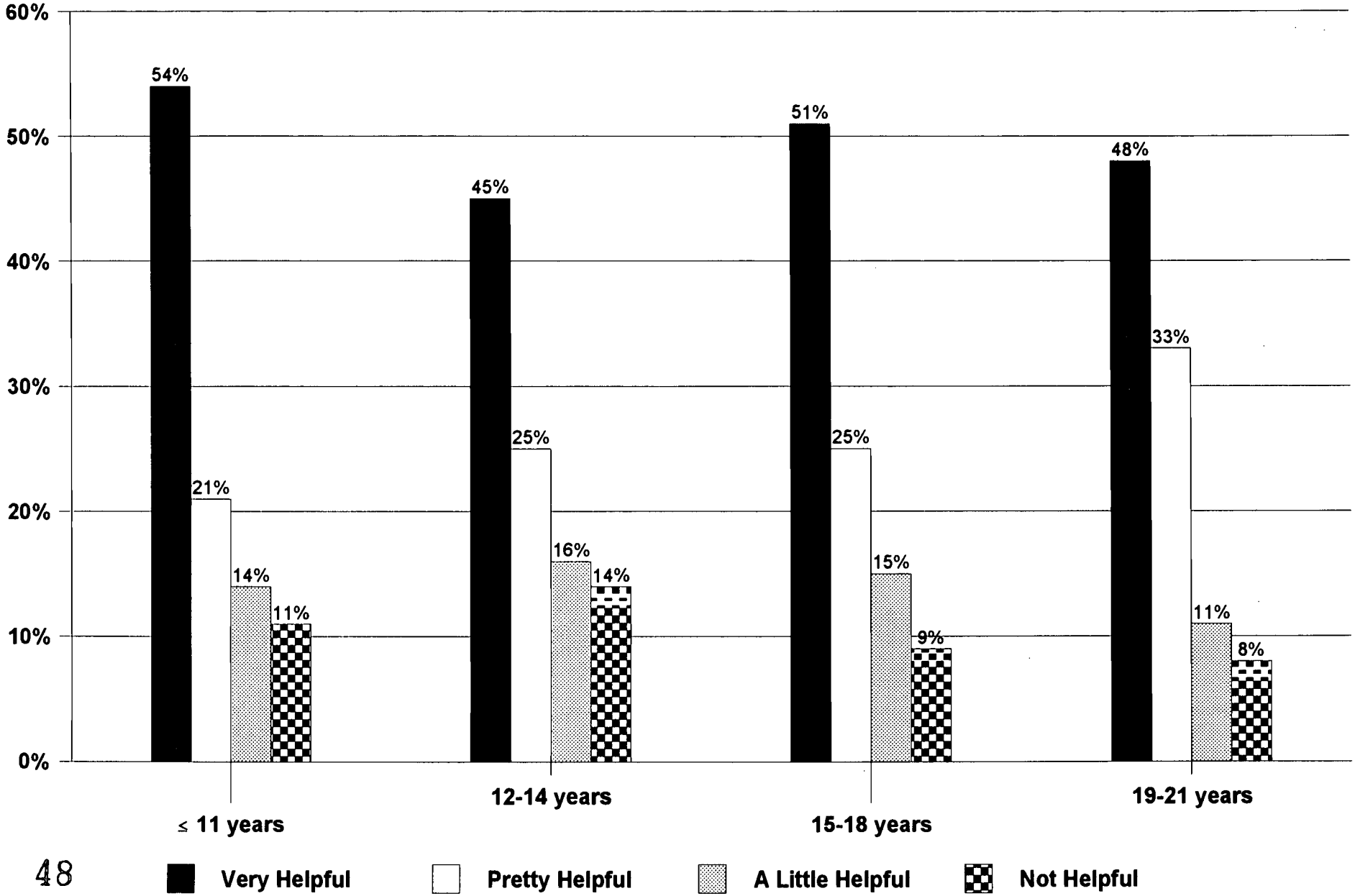
Figure 7 shows the young people's assessment of the helpfulness of the Beacon in avoiding fighting. At all age levels, roughly three-quarters of youth reported that the Beacon was either very helpful or pretty helpful in enabling them to avoid interpersonal violence. These responses indicate an enthusiastic appreciation of the Beacon's utility in both these areas of risk. The variation in perceived helpfulness across age categories is similar to the patterns for avoiding drug use, with a slight decline in the combined positive responses among the 12–14-year-olds (70% combined positive response), but an increasingly positive assessment with the 15–18-year-olds and the 19–21-years-olds (76% and 81% combined positive response.).

Figure 6. Helpfulness of Beacon in "avoiding drug use," by age group



Source: Intercept interviews with youth (n = 725)

Figure 7. Helpfulness of Beacon in learning to avoid fighting, by age group



Source: Intercept interviews with youth (n =1,340)

Figure 8: Helpfulness of Beacon in "doing better in school," by age-group
Source: Intercept interviews with youth, n =1,331

Figure 8 shows the distribution of responses to a question about the helpfulness of the Beacon with regard to improving young people's schoolwork. The two affirmative responses were highest among elementary school–aged youth, where more than four-fifths (84%) of youth reported the Beacon to be very helpful or pretty helpful. Although the "very helpful" responses declined as youth got older, they were still strongly positive, with at least two-thirds of adolescents responding either very helpful or pretty helpful. The increase of strongly affirmative responses among the young adult participants may reflect participation in the GED programs offered by the Beacons in cooperation with the board of education.

Figure 9. Helpfulness of Beacon in "volunteering in community," by age-group
Source: Intercept interviews with youth, n = 1,254

Figure 10. Helpfulness of Beacon in "being a leader," by age-group
Sources: Intercept interviews with youth, n = 1,299

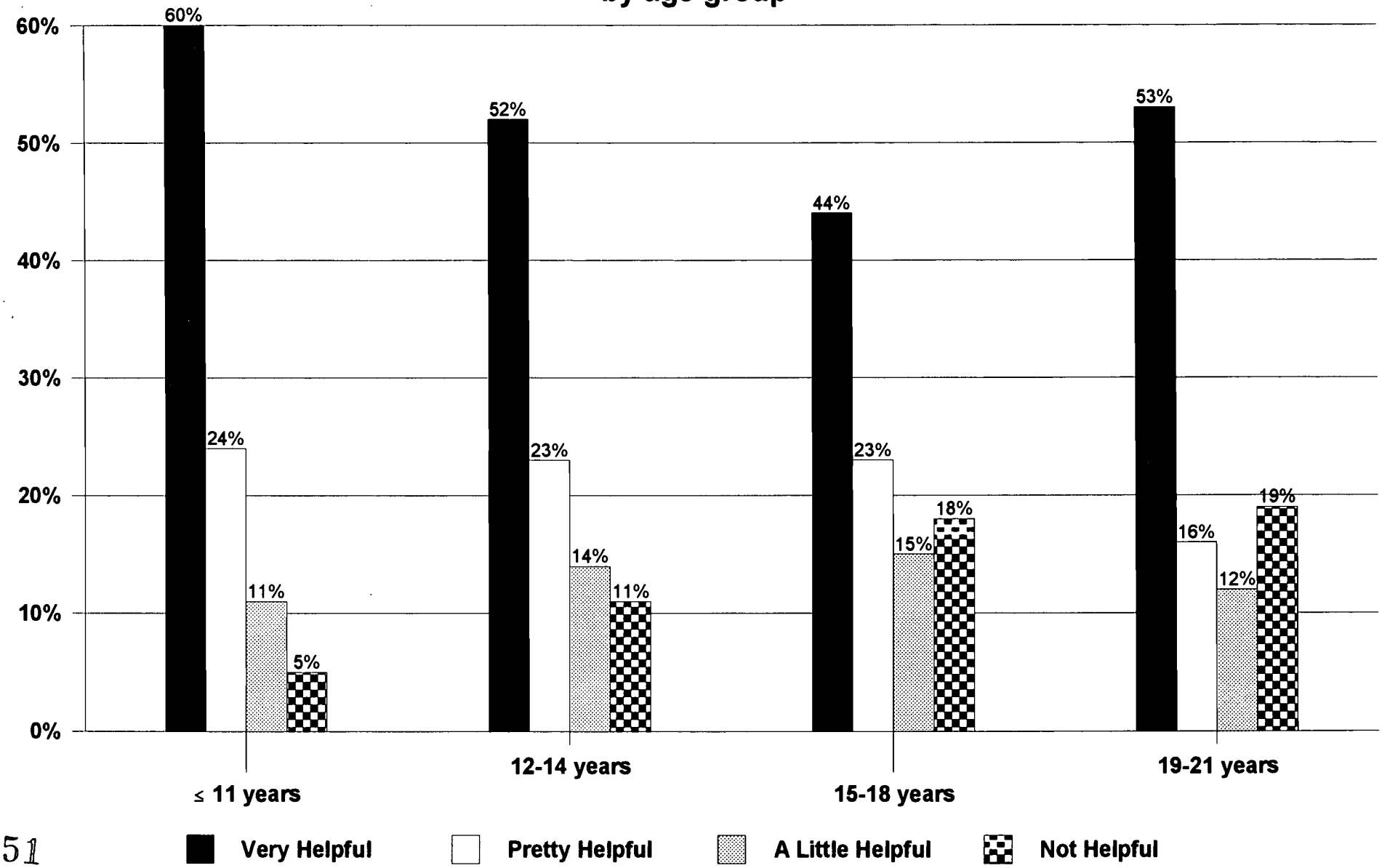
Figures 9 and 10 show the distribution of responses to questions about the Beacon's role in fostering leadership skills and community service. In both areas, young people found the Beacon increasingly helpful as they got older; this may reflect the greater concentration of community service and leadership activities for older youth. In brief, almost three-fifths (59%) said the Beacon was very helpful or pretty helpful in providing opportunities to volunteer in the community; and almost three-quarters (72%) of interviewed youth said the Beacon was very helpful or pretty helpful in helping them learn to be a leader. Moreover, both the affirmative responses (pretty helpful) and the strongly affirmative responses (very helpful) increased as youth got older.

Discussion

In our observations of Beacon youth activities, we found wide evidence of YDI's efforts to promote a vision of high-quality youth programming and to help the Beacons organize activities consistent with that vision. On the whole, the youth programs offered by the Beacons appear to meet the standards of positive youth development practice. Staff longevity permits the development of caring and trusting relationships, and the well-trained staff design and conduct a broad array of activities that engage the interest of participants and challenge them to grow and develop. Further, most Beacons offer a full range of activities and opportunities for young people to make a contribution and to develop leadership skills. The result is a safe, supportive environment and programming and activities that foster positive behaviors among youth and help them avoid negative ones.

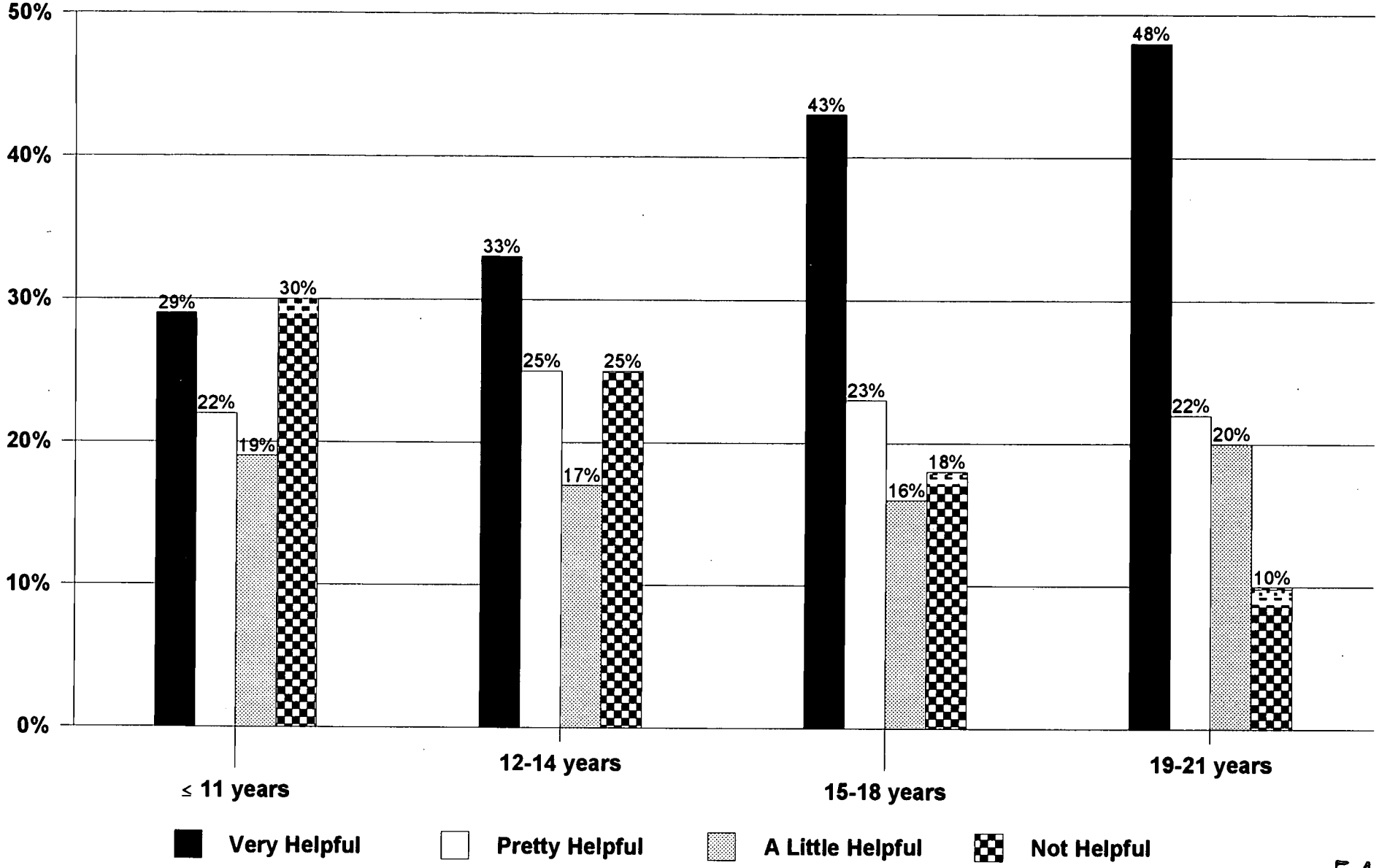
However, in visiting 39 sites, we observed various degrees of fidelity to the principles of youth development programming—as might be expected when there are so many Beacons managed and sponsored by such a range of lead agencies and implemented for different lengths of time. We saw some sites that were stronger than others, where even drop-in activities reflected a commitment to these core organizing principles. In a few sites, however, activities resembled more traditional recreation programs that sought little more than to keep young people off the streets. These programs certainly were not harmful, but they missed the valuable opportunity to fully exploit their potential to foster the healthy development of young people.

Figure 8. Helpfulness of Beacon in "doing better in school," by age group



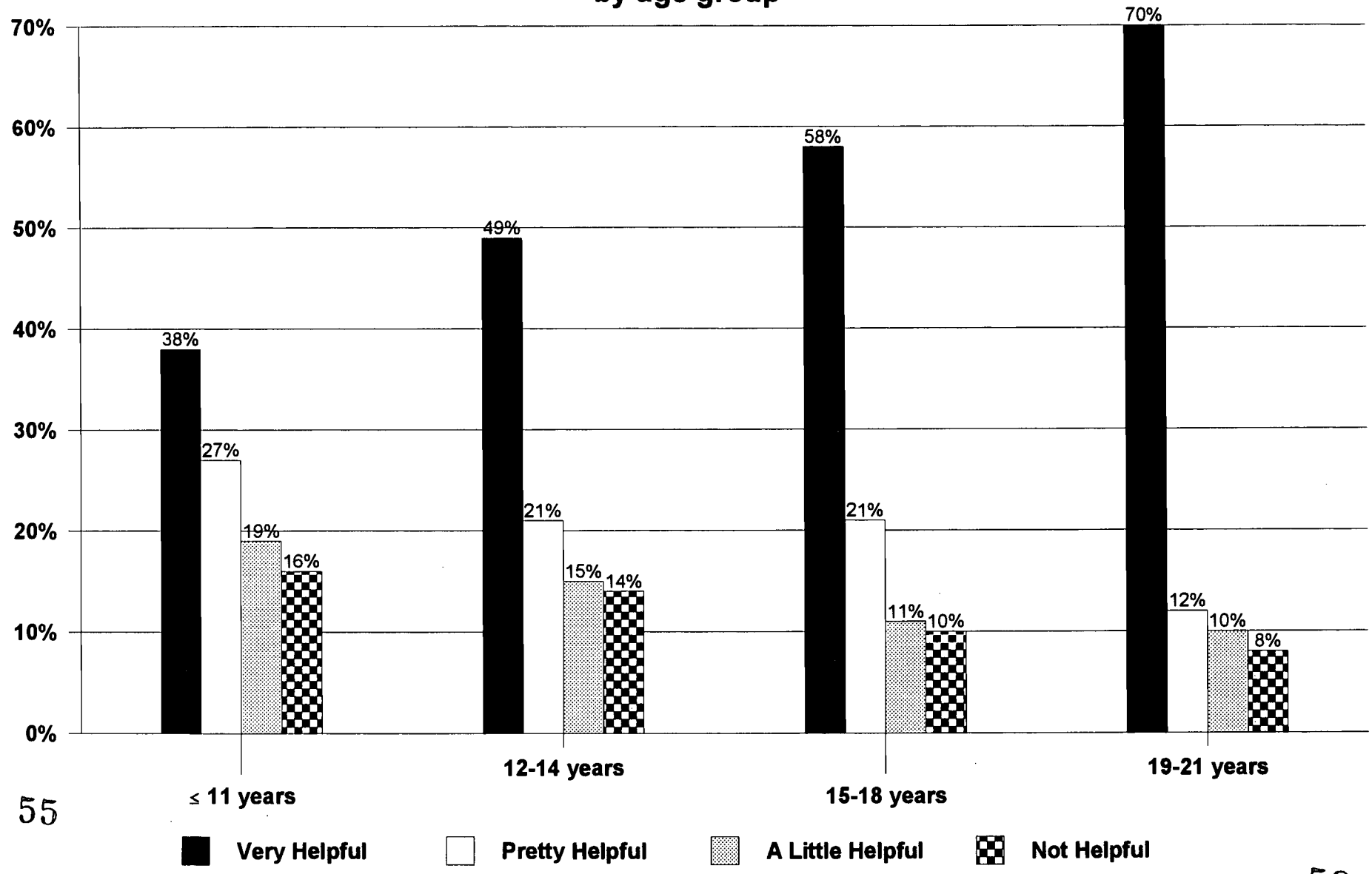
Source: Intercept interviews with youth (n = 1,348)

Figure 9. Helpfulness of Beacon in "volunteering in community," by age group



Source: Intercept interviews with youth (n = 1,270)

Figure 10. Helpfulness of Beacon in "being a leader," by age group



Source: Intercept interviews with youth (n = 1,297)

V. Academic Support and Enrichment Activities

From their inception, Beacons were intended to include activities for children and youth that reinforced their educational experiences during the school day. The founders of the Beacons drew on the strength of several of the lead agencies with extensive prior experience in working with schools and with students in afterschool programs. They envisioned that the Beacons could help support the academic progress of participants by creating a different kind of learning environment with activities more closely related to the cultural backgrounds of the children. These would include cultural programs, computer instruction, field trips, and experiences to help youth discover their talents and develop a stronger sense of themselves as successful learners.

It bears repeating that not all students in Beacon academic support and enrichment activities attend the host school. Beacons are located in both elementary and middle schools, as well in as one high school, and are open to all the young people of the surrounding neighborhood. Thus, unlike many other afterschool programs that exclusively serve the population of their host schools, the participants may come from many different schools, either because they are not in the grades served by the school or because they attend another school in the neighborhood. This means that Beacon staff must design academic support and enrichment activities that are not connected directly to any particular school or class curriculum.

Major findings in this area are discussed below under the following topics: the age-groups served by the program; homework assistance; enrichment activities; assessment of participant progress; contact with schools and families; and other work with schools.

Figure 11. Percentage of Beacons serving youth of different ages in academic support and enrichment programs
Source: Interviews with Beacon education staff or persons responsible for academic programs

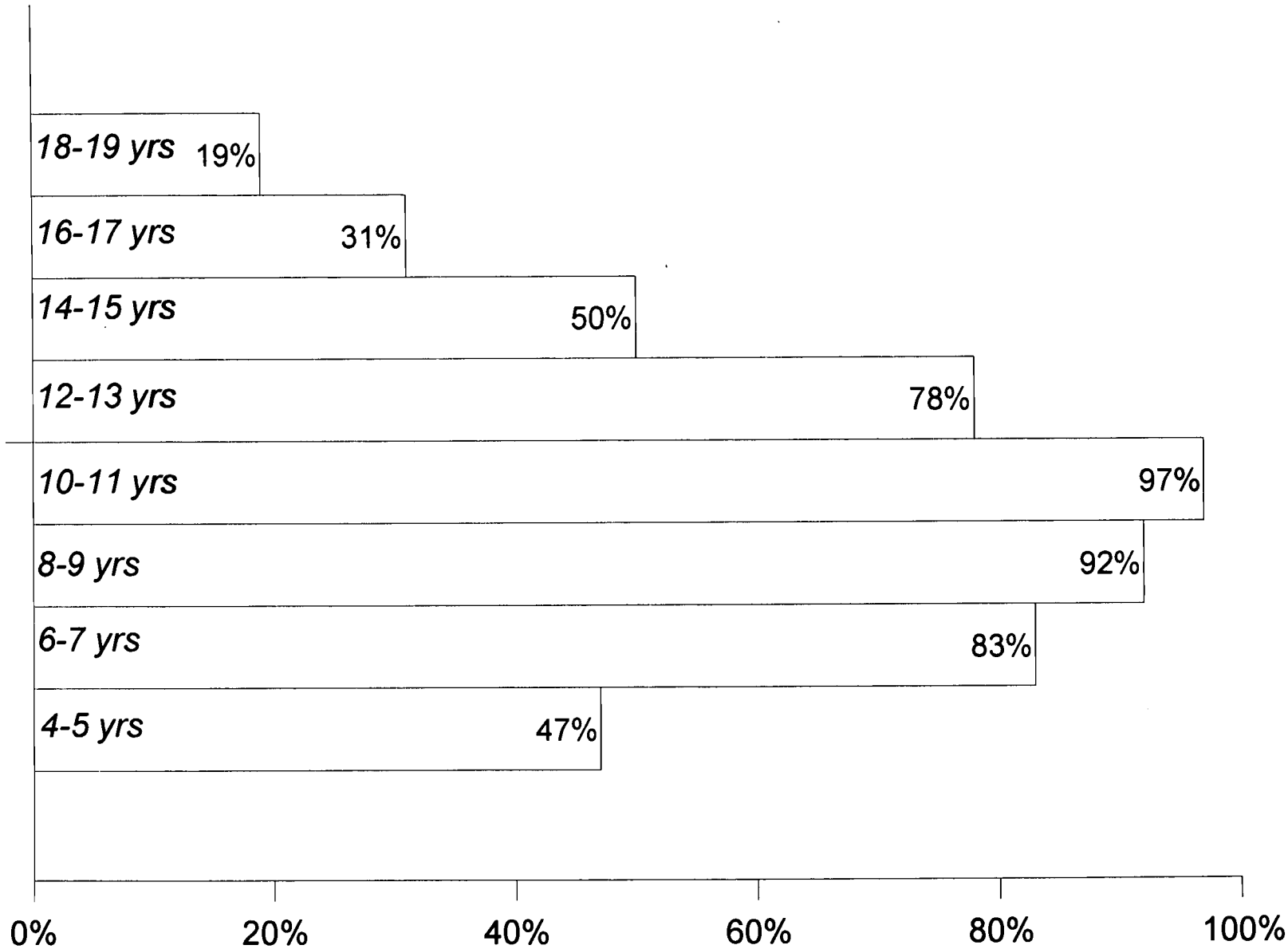
Ages of Population Served

Figure 11 shows that Beacon academic programs serve young people of different ages. The primary audience for these educational programs are younger children, who often have a combination of academic, recreational, and cultural programming in the late afternoon hours. In their educational activities, more than four-fifths of Beacons serve 6- and 7-year- olds (83%) and 8- and 9-year-olds (92%), and all but one Beacon (97%) serve 10-and 11-year-olds. Within the age range for the grades of the host school, approximately two-thirds of the participants attend the host school.

While elementary school is clearly the focus of the majority of the academic support programs, many Beacons also offer these kinds of programs to some older youth. More than three-quarters (78%) of Beacons provide some form of academic assistance for 12- and 13-year-olds, and half serve 14- and 15-year-olds.

Most Beacons employ some professionally trained staff to work in the academic activities, with a majority (55%) mixing professional and nonprofessional staff. The afterschool program is staffed

Figure 11. Percentage of Beacons serving youth of different ages in academic support and enrichment activities



Source: Interviews with Beacon education staff or person responsible for academic programs

primarily with professional staff drawn from the host school in only 16 percent of sites. Slightly more than half the Beacons (53%) reported using some form of prepared curriculum in at least some of the academic activities, but fewer than one Beacon in five described all their academic activities as curriculum-based. Two-thirds of Beacons (68%) provide some form of training or professional development to staff working in the academic activities. In half the Beacons, peers are engaged as tutors to help others, either individually or within the larger homework assistance setting.

Homework Assistance

Help with homework is an important aspect of the academic enrichment and support offered by the Beacons, which provide thousands of elementary and middle school students with the opportunity to complete their homework in a quiet environment with additional support from adults. Thirty-six sites (92%) offer homework help sessions, and more than half (58%) reported offering individual tutoring for students when needed. In more than a third of Beacons (38%), homework help constitutes all or most of the afterschool academic activities, but the majority of Beacons (51%) divide the afterschool academic program roughly equally between homework help and other forms of educational activities.

There is a continuing debate among Beacon providers and other professionals about the appropriate balance between homework help and other forms of academic enrichment (not specifically tied to homework or the daytime curriculum) in afterschool programs. On one side are those who advocate using the afterschool hours for activities that do not simply extend the school day but instead provide opportunities for youth to discover their talents in other ways. On the other are parents and teachers who point out that students need a quiet place to get their homework done, preferably with professionally trained staff to help them. This is particularly important for parents in immigrant families who may be unfamiliar with the expectations of the school, as well as for parents who cannot provide academic support to their children. As one mother explained in a focus group, "Many times I don't understand English and I can't help them with their homework. Now they have someone to help them."

However, in too many Beacons, it appeared that the ratio of youth to adults in the homework assistance component was large enough to preclude much individual support for students having more than minimal difficulty with their schoolwork. More than half the Beacons reported having at least a 10-to-one ratio of students to staff in the academic activities. (These numbers, while perhaps higher than what would be desirable, are still better than what exists in most schools.) The use of both youth and adult volunteers in several sites was a creative solution to this problem, particularly where the volunteers received careful training about how to help students.

Educational Enrichment Activities

Almost all the Beacons (95%) offer some other kind of educational enrichment activity—such as drama, music, dance, or the visual arts—beyond homework help. These activities enable young people to learn new skills and experience themselves as capable learners in settings other than school. Field trips and guest speakers are frequently employed (in 86% of sites) to expand the horizons of Beacon participants. In three-quarters of the Beacons, participants can join reading

groups (76%) or engage in writing projects (73%), including creative writing and student publications, such as a community newspaper researched and written by youth. In the few Beacons where educational programs are limited to little more than homework assistance, however, more attention is needed to develop a broader array of educational enrichment activities that stimulate and challenge participants and help them discover their own learning capacities.

YDI has actively promoted strategies to improve the quality of Beacon educational activities. In addition to conducting professional development activities for Beacon staff, YDI has devoted resources to developing and producing a handbook on literacy-based afterschool education.[9] YDI has also raised funds to make grants to 20 Beacons undertaking special literacy development projects. A particular focus of these projects and of YDI's technical assistance has been the use of themes for framing literacy activities and designing educational activities. This emphasis also is reflected in the finding that more than half the Beacons (56%) reported organizing their academic activities around themes.

Assessment of Participant Progress

Assessment of student progress in educational activities has also been the subject of YDI guidance to the Beacons. When asked about their approach to assessing students' progress, the overwhelming majority (89%) of Beacons reported that they reviewed the information on the students' Beacon intake forms and attendance reports. More than four of five Beacon education coordinators (83%) reported that their staff provided informal feedback to students on their progress in the educational activities. Two-thirds also reviewed students' report cards and test scores. Half the Beacons' educational activity staff prepared periodic written assessments of student progress and conferred with parents, either by phone or in person; 47% maintained folders of student work; and 17% systematically tracked completion of homework.

Contact with Schools and Parents on Academic Issues

More than half of Beacons reported communication between Beacon staff and participants' classroom teachers. This is encouraging, since not all Beacon participants attend the host school, and communication with participants' teachers may involve more than leaving notes in the teachers' mailboxes; it may require phone calls or off-site visits to discuss students' needs and progress. However, fully a third of the Beacons reported no communication at all between the Beacon staff and participants' classroom teachers. In some cases, evaluators were told that the teachers did not stay after school or make themselves available for communication with Beacon staff about individual children's needs. However, in these cases, even brief written communication with classroom teachers could yield helpful information that might make academic activities more productive on an individual level. This will require effort on the part of both Beacon and school staff.

Parents in the evaluation's focus groups indicated that the Beacon has been instrumental in helping their children receive much-needed additional academic support. Some parents credit the Beacon with accelerating their children's progress in school, while others spoke about their children's

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[9] A. Rice, J. Mates, J. Colon, and C. Hall, *Beacons and Afterschool Education: Making Literacy Links*, Youth Development Institute, 1997.

learning the discipline of completing homework. In other instances, parents reported that the Beacon's academic support had helped their children regain a love of learning:

> *The Beacon makes learning fun and exciting. They've already gone through so many books in the literacy program. My son is now getting 100s and he's reading on his own, even reading to me.*

> *My son used to be very discouraged with school. At the Beacon, he gets a lot of encouragement and support. He's more involved in school, now.*

Discussion

Consistent with the recent burst of interest in afterschool academic support and enrichment programs, the Beacons are working to take advantage of the opportunity to support and reinforce the work of the school in their activities for young people during the afternoon hours. The whole field of afterschool education is still developing, and given the range in prior experience of the lead agencies in providing afterschool educational programs, it is not surprising that the educational activities at the Beacons vary from site to site. While more in-depth judgments about the quality of afterschool offerings cannot be made based on relatively brief visits to each Beacon, it was clear that some Beacons have been innovative in creating stimulating and engaging educational enrichment for young people, while a few—offering little more in the way of educational activities than a supervised study hall—did not take advantage of the opportunity to support and stretch the academic development of the young people attending the Beacon. On the whole, however, the Beacons provide, at the very least, a safe, supervised and relatively quiet place for young people to do their homework, as well as staff (often with pedagogical training) to help young people when questions arise. At their best, the Beacons offer exciting educational activities that engage young people in learning in different ways than their schools do and that help young people strengthen their vision of themselves as learners.

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> *The kids get good help in reading and math and other homework.* (Beacon adult)

> *Before my daughter joined the Beacon, it was difficult for me to help her with her homework—she didn't want to do it and I didn't know how to help her. Now it's a habit for her to do her homework; it's the Beacon's help.* (Beacon adult)

> *The Beacon provides a forum where seniors and youth can interact. I helped a 10-year-old girl sew three dresses. It was wonderful.* (Beacon adult)

> *I have five kids and no space at home. The Beacon gives me a place to think and meditate to relieve my stress.* (Beacon adult)

VI. Programs and Supports for Parents and Other Adults

From the beginning, the concept of the Beacon included services and activities for adults, as well as multiage and intergenerational activities. It was hoped that the Beacons would be able to attract adults in their troubled neighborhoods and engage them actively in the life of the community. In addition, the Beacons hoped to strengthen the relationships between the generations, particularly in families strained by economic and social conditions.

To learn more about how parents and other adults used the Beacon, evaluators conducted focus groups at each Beacon that had parents participating in its activities. A total of 227 adults, 95 percent of whom were parents, shared their perceptions of the Beacon and its importance to their neighborhood with the evaluators. First and foremost in the eyes of the focus-group participants was the Beacon's provision of safe and free afterschool programs for their children. Many parents eloquently described their appreciation of the activities in which their children participated. For many, the Beacon meant the difference between staying at home with their children and working for pay; other parents were able to participate in educational activities that helped them prepare for employment outside the home. Participants also spoke of the peace of mind of knowing that their children were not home alone, were receiving help with schoolwork, and were involved in safe activities after school.

Table 3. Activities and Services for Adults

Activity offered	% offering	Activity offered	% offering
Education (GED, ESL, computer)	87	Parent support groups	67
Recreation and sports	87	Parent counseling	67
Cultural and multicultural	87	Arts activities	46
Referrals to services	79	Immigration-related services	46
Opportunities to volunteer	74	Employment assistance	41
Meeting space for organizations	69	Advocacy	36

Source: Interviews with Beacon directors and staff

Being able to make space in the school available to other community groups has been an important source of programs and activities in more than two-thirds of the Beacons. Some small community groups with inadequate resources to rent their own space, such as those devoted to maintaining the cultural heritage of a particular group, find the Beacon a valuable community resource that has allowed them not only to continue operating but also to gain organizational legitimacy. In addition, other better known groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, find the Beacon an excellent site from which to reach out to adults in the community.

Involving parents as well as children in activities is often been difficult for many community-based agencies, not just the Beacons. Most Beacons have been creativite in developing programs that

address parents' interests and needs and encourage them to participate in a wide range of activities, as shown in Table 3. In some cases, lower-than-hoped-for attendance occurred because some parents found it difficult to make time for Beacon activities after attending to work and family responsibilities. In other cases, parents were reticent to participate because of cultural differences. This experience is similar to that of many organizations other than the Beacons, including schools. Several sites have developed additional strategies for encouraging more regular parental participation in the Beacon—for example, requiring a parent whose young child is in the afterschool program (a highly prized spot) to attend monthly workshops. These strategies have been particularly helpful in communities where parents' cultural background or prior experiences cause them to be hesitant about entering a school.

The large majority of Beacons offer activities in three major areas that attract substantial numbers of parents and other adult participants: educational activities, sports and recreational activities, and culturally specific programming. Beacons also provide opportunities to volunteer, supports for Beacon families, intergenerational activities, and opportunities for community partnerships. These are discussed below.

Educational Activities

Adult education opportunities at the Beacon are anchored by programs offered in cooperation with the New York City Board of Education, including GED, basic literacy, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In addition, many Beacons offer some form of computer instruction for adults. Some combination of these adult education activities can be found in almost nine out of 10 (87%) Beacons. Many educational activities draw adults from the community in addition to the parents of Beacon participants, and some adults come from beyond the immediate neighborhood to take advantage of the Beacon's classes. Some classes are general in their approach, but others quite specifically target the development of potentially marketable skills (e.g., English for taxi drivers) or other issues related to economic well-being, such as a home ownership workshop.

Sports and Recreational Activities

The second area of programming for adults includes sports and recreational activities aimed at adults. This includes basketball and karate, which mainly draw young men, and aerobics classes, which attract more women. Many of these activities, which can be found in 87% of Beacons, were initiated after surveying the parent population about what kinds of activities and services they wanted at the Beacon.

Cultural Programs

The third area where most of the Beacons (87%) have developed and offer activities involves culturally specific programs. In some cases, these are offered by community-based cultural organizations as a way of preserving their traditions. In other cases, the activities involve the sharing of traditions across different cultural and ethnic groups, as one parent explained: "We participated in a cooking class where we shared different cultural recipes, and we learned a lot about the obstacles people had to overcome just to get here."

Opportunities to Volunteer

The three program areas discussed above are closely followed in popularity by those opportunities for parents and other adults to volunteer at the Beacon. Those parents who have been drawn into the Beacon often become enthusiastic supporters of the Beacon's work in a wide variety of activities. Almost three-quarters of Beacons (74%) make these opportunities available to adults, and one-fifth of sites reported having at least 10 adult volunteers working at the Beacon. Table 4 shows the roles that adult volunteers play at the Beacon.

Table 4. Adult Volunteer Roles at the Beacons

Classroom volunteers	Escorts	Coaching	Servers/ cooks	Program assistants	Security	Governance
English as a Second Language	To Beacon from other schools	Basketball	Serve snacks/ lunch	Teach chess	Monitor hallways	Advisory board members
Homework help	To Beacon games	Soccer	Cook for special occasions	Sew costumes	Monitor behavior in gym	Parent council members
Reading	On Beacon trips				Front desk	

Source: Focus groups with parents

Focus-group participants who had volunteered to serve as coaches or do security work were male, while the focus-group participants who cooked, sewed, and assisted in the classroom were usually female. Among adult participants in general, women appeared to outnumber men by large margins. Currently, most men come for sports, but focus-group participants (mainly women) suggested that more men might come if other kinds of activities were offered.

The efforts of volunteers are critical to the survival of the Beacons. As stated above, one-fifth of Beacons (22%) reported that they had at least 10 adult volunteers working in the Beacon on a regular basis, and almost a third (32%) reported that they relied on a core group of at least five volunteers. A few participants indicated that their volunteer commitments led to employment at the Beacon. Even for those working without pay, the opportunity to volunteer contributed to their feeling more connected to the neighborhood. Parents who volunteered also reported that the opportunity to do so had brought them closer to their children:

> *My daughter was part of a dance group at the Beacon—12 girls were involved. I helped them buy the music and sew the costumes. It was an opportunity to cooperate and share something that was very important to her.*

> *I went on a Beacon trip with my teen and other teens. He saw how much I volunteered that day and felt really nurtured. It was a great experience for us both.*

Supporting Beacon Families

Two-thirds of Beacons provide specific support to parents, though counseling, support groups, or workshops on parenting issues. "My son and I were always arguing" explained one mother; "at the Beacon they taught me to listen to him, listen to his feelings. I listen to him now, I let him explain." In addition, some Beacons conduct sessions designed to help parents learn to communicate better with their children's teachers.

In 16 Beacons (40%), special services are provided to families in which children are at high risk for foster-care placement. These services, provided through a special fiscal arrangement with the Agency for Children's Services (ACS), enable parents to get help in a familiar neighborhood setting and to benefit from a variety of other Beacon services and activities that can reinforce the specialized supports provided by the ACS caseworkers. More than four-fifths of the family support coordinators in these sites report that ACS programs refer families and individuals in their care to other Beacon activities. Like other child welfare services nationally, ACS is moving toward a more community-based model of child protective services.[10] Many low-income communities, however, lack the institutional infrastructure in which to embed these services. The Beacons represent an important model of a vehicle through which local communities can assume increasing responsibility for children's safety and healthy development.

While some Beacons can provide intensive services directly, most (79%) reported serving as referral sources for their participants. Two focus-group participants said:

> *The community uses the Beacon as a resource. They ask questions about how to get certain services and things.*
>
> *The Beacon is good for obtaining resources, help and referrals. I take advantage of all the info they provide.*

Several Beacons operate in communities where there are substantial concentrations of new immigrant families. While we have no data on the concentration of immigrants in different neighborhoods, in 10 Beacon schools, more than 25% of students have limited English proficiency.[11] The activities and services directed toward immigrant parents and their children support both their integration into the United States and the continuity of their culture of origin. Beyond ESL classes, some Beacons in these communities have added activities and services to help these families deal with the complex legal issues of their status in the United States. The Beacon also provides a location where immigrants can meet to maintain contact with others coming from their same countries and cultures as well as to transmit that culture to their children through classes and social

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[10] F. Farrow, "Community Responsibility for Protecting Children: What Does it Mean Now, What Can it Mean in the Future?" *The Prevention Report*, National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice, 1998, #1, 11–13.

[11] New York City Board of Education's Division of Assessment and Accountability, *New York City Public Schools Performance Report, 1996–1997.*

events. Finally, several Beacons in multiethnic neighborhoods have organized activities to help participants become acquainted with the cultural traditions of other groups in their community.

Intergenerational Activities

In addition to the activities and services aimed at individual adults, whether parents or not, many Beacons have worked hard to organize and conduct activities that bring different generations together, both within and outside families. For example, in some Beacons, annual holiday parties draw hundreds of local families together in celebration. Other Beacons build intergenerational contact into ongoing activities, such as parent-child computer classes. Three-quarters (76%) of Beacons reported holding intergenerational activities at least several times a year, and almost one in four Beacons (24%) reported including these activities on a continuing basis. One mother described the benefits of these activities:

> *In our parent group, teens come in and do our hair. They pamper us and we get to know them. It helps both ways. They help me communicate with my own kids and we've helped them communicate with their parents.*

Another parent reported that this communication now extends outside the Beacon:

> *In the community, you can talk more to the kids in the street. You know them from the Beacon.*

Discussion

The most important aspect of the Beacon for most parents interviewed by evaluators was the opportunities it provided for their children. Although safety was a primary concern, parents valued more than just the safety that the Beacon provided. Their comments reflect parent appreciation of the variety and quality of the programs offered by many Beacons:

> *My two sons come to the Beacon and they do their homework, plus are taking up music and art. There's no way I could afford that on my own.*

> *At the Beacon, they have more than we can afford to give them. They can learn music. They can run around and jump—things they can't do in our apartment.*

Parents also participated in a wide range of other kinds of Beacon activities, from educational offerings to exercise classes to arts and cultural activities. They met other adults from their neighborhoods and participated in family-focused activities. They saw the Beacon as an important addition to the neighborhood, and many showed their support by volunteering in a variety of roles. A few Beacons have been particularly creative in using the appeal of children's activities to pull parents into monthly meetings and workshops that address the parents' concerns and needs, thus both providing a direct service and helping to break down the parents' shyness about interacting with the school. Two parents said:

Since I've been coming to the Beacon I can talk to a teacher face to face calmly.

I've learned how to bring up issues with teachers, with the PTA.

In sum, most Beacons offer a wide range of activities and services for parents and other adults, as well as a variety of intergenerational activities that attract the parents of Beacon youth. Many Beacons are doing an admirable job of reaching parents and providing services that have a direct positive impact on their lives. However, many Beacon directors told evaluators that it remained difficult to get substantial numbers of parents involved in ongoing Beacon activities, except on special occasions. Although the Beacons have been relatively successful in attracting parents compared to other institutions (e.g., schools), many Beacon directors said that they would like to see larger numbers of parents and other adults coming to the Beacons.

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I've seen a lot of youth change at the Beacon because they got the support they needed. They were involved in gangs and now they've left them. (Beacon adult)

At the Beacon, the youth are part of something positive; they're giving back to their communities. (Beacon adult)

The Beacon helped me to be more open on how I feel about things and helped me to control my attitude. (Beacon youth)

I like the balance between academics and recreation. (Beacon adult)

The Beacon also conducts street fairs for the community. We get a lot of information like that. I also find the workshops useful like the ones on AIDS and tenants' rights. (Beacon adult)

I come to the Beacon for healthcare information, to network with other parents and get encouragement. People at the Beacon will help you with anything. (Beacon adult)

If you have a problem, the staff at the Beacon will help you. It's not always like that in other places. (Beacon adult)

VII. Neighborhood Safety and Community Building

From their inception, Beacons were charged with creating safe havens in neighborhoods where crime and violence often undermined positive youth opportunities. By being embedded in the community, Beacons were seen as well positioned to take on a range of community-building functions: they could respond to the particular needs, interests, and backgrounds of youth and families from the community; they could contribute to the community's capacity to address its problems by creating opportunities for community dialogue, problem-solving, and action; and they could sponsor community service projects, foster leadership among both youth and adults, and participate broadly in the civic and social life of the community. In sum, Beacon architects envisioned that the Beacons—themselves and in collaboration with other groups and institutions—would have significant potential to make the community a safer and better place.

Congruent with this charge, Beacon directors uniformly endorse a community-building philosophy that defines one of the Beacon's roles as effecting change in the immediate neighborhood. The directors vary considerably, however, in the kinds of changes they expect the Beacon to stimulate. Some see the Beacon's primary impact as creating a safer neighborhood by keeping youth off the street and engaged in positive activities. Others see its effects largely through the provision of needed services to community members, resulting in, for example, a community with "more high school diplomas, more English speakers, . . . more working parents." A smaller group of directors offered a more expansive view of the Beacon's role, one in which the Beacon serves as a catalyst for community development, for people "establishing relationships and connecting, taking responsibility for community events," and for "people crossing neighborhood lines to come to activities."

Despite significant variation in their conceptions of how to implement the Beacon's community-building role, more than half of Beacon directors described their Beacon as very active in the social, cultural, and political life of the larger community; 43% described their Beacon as somewhat active; and only 6% described it as not very active. Such a relatively high level of reported activity in the community is particularly interesting given that most lead agencies had more prior experience in youth and family services than in community safety issues or community improvement efforts.

Major findings in this area are summarized below under the following topics: community staffing at the Beacon; community-building roles for the Beacon, including neighborhood safety, community dialogue and problem-solving, and community service; community advisory councils; and creating social capital.

Community Staffing at the Beacon

Although the communities served by the Beacons face difficult problems associated with unemployment, underemployment, poverty, substance abuses and crime, they also possess local assets on which to build. Director after director cited the community residents' diversity, energy, and commitment to the neighborhood, and many directors have incorporated this energy into the Beacons, as shown in Table 5.

While slightly more than one-third of the Beacons' directors and codirectors live in the neighborhood served by the Beacon, more than four-fifths had experience working in the Beacon community prior to taking these positions. An additional one-third of directors, though not residents of the immediately surrounding neighborhood, live in the same general area as the Beacon. Slightly more than half the Beacons reported that the majority of their full-time staff were local residents, and two-thirds of Beacons reported that the majority of their full-time staff also had prior experience working in the community.

Table 5. Community Roots of Beacon Staff

	Live in the community	Have worked previously in the community
Beacon directors & codirectors	36%	85%
More than 50% of full-time staff	53%	68%
More than 50% of part-time staff	90%	76%

Source: Interviews with Beacon directors

Part-time staff, who outnumber full-time staff in most Beacons, are even more likely to be drawn from the surrounding community: 90% of Beacons reported that the majority of their staff are local residents, and three-quarters reported that their part-time staff have prior experience working locally.

Community-Building Roles for the Beacon

The ways in which Beacons work to effect neighborhood change or involve themselves in the life of the community vary considerably but can be grouped into three areas: neighborhood safety, community dialogue and problem-solving, and community service.

Neighborhood Safety

Besides a range of strategies to enhance security internally, many Beacons deploy safety measures to create more secure environments for participants in the Beacon's immediate neighborhood. Most frequently, this involves establishing safety escorts or cooperating with existing neighborhood patrols. One-third (33%) of the Beacons have secured additional police surveillance for the area around the Beacon, and two-fifths (39%) have arranged to have younger participants escorted from their schools to the Beacon in the afternoon. In addition, a small number of Beacon—five sites—provide escorts to take participants home at nights.

More than three-fourths (76%) of Beacon directors indicated that their Beacon had organized or conducted activities to enhance neighborhood safety during the last year. Most Beacons do not limit their neighborhood safety goals and activities to simple protection. Rather, they aim to engage the police, youth, and adults in the community in public education and prevention activities. Examples of these activities include working with the police to increase the frequency and effectiveness of their

neighborhood patrols; conducting seminars and holding meetings on such topics as violence prevention, fire safety, racial harmony, and gang violence; and participating in events such as candlelight vigils and Stop the Violence Day.

Another threat to safety in many Beacon communities is violence between different groups in the community—for example, between different ethnic/racial groups, between immigrants and longtime residents, or between residents and the police. More than two-thirds of Beacon directors (70%) reported that the Beacon had sponsored activities to mediate difficult or hostile relationships within the community. Two common foci for Beacon work in this area are community youth and police relations and gang mediation. Several Beacons sponsor ongoing community mediation sessions, some contracting with outside organizations for these services. Sometimes, however, the behind-the-scenes work of individual Beacon staff plays a special role in promoting positive neighborhood relations and safety: a director who meets with a gang leader to ensure that the gang does not use the Beacon as a place to recruit new members; a youth worker who structures the sports teams to be mixed ethnically and racially; or a staff person who coaches youth informally on how to relate to the police on the street.

One result of these neighborhood safety activities is that the overwhelming majority of youth and adult focus-group participants interviewed perceive the Beacon both as having created a safe place for children, youth, and adults and as having improved the safety of the neighborhood around the school. In neighborhoods that are frequently plagued by crime, drugs, gang activity, and other forms of violence, parents see the Beacon as a "safe haven." One parent said:

> *Before, I would not let my kids out, but I let my kids come to the Beacon. It is a safe place for children.*

In addition, focus-group participants reported that the Beacon's neighborhood improvement efforts contributed to curtailing negative activity, such as crime and drugs in their communities, further bolstering the Beacon's reputation as a safe haven. One adult stated:

> *I thought the neighborhood was going downhill, but once the Beacon started, the neighborhood has improved. There is less negative activity. I don't see drugs in the neighborhood.*

Community Dialogue and Problem Solving

One way that Beacons fill a community-building role is by creating opportunities for people to come together to address a common problem or to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. Three-fourths of Beacon directors (78%) reported addressing a specific community problem, through such activities as helping the residents respond to an act of violence in the neighborhood, creating a taskforce to address welfare reform, organizing a graffiti paint-out, or participating in community board meetings. These activities sometimes move Beacon staff toward an advocacy or public policy role: they find themselves requesting that the parks department renovate a park adjacent to the school, helping youth carry out a petition to stop a filtration plant project in the neighborhood, or working with other organizations to close an active incinerator nearby.

Other community-building activities focus more broadly on creating a shared sense of community. More than 90% of Beacon directors reported sponsoring activities to "make the community a better place to live." Examples included voter registration drives, community cleanups, and cultural events and celebrations. In ethnically diverse communities, multicultural youth festivals and potluck dinners or events celebrating different cultural heritages are ways in which Beacons provide opportunities for diverse community residents to get to know and trust one another. In some cases, residents' perceptions that the community is actively improving itself has had significant effects. One focus-group participant stated:

> *I was thinking about moving, but I decided to stay, and the Beacon is part of the reason I stayed. My kids love it, and it's improved the whole community.*

Three-fourths of the Beacon directors noted that one of the ways that the Beacon tried to improve the neighborhood was through bringing together other community organizations. By inviting organizations to participate in health fairs, by sponsoring tenant and block association conferences, and by developing collaborative activities with local churches, Beacons have extended their reach into the community.

While the majority of Beacons engage in the community dialogue and problem-solving activities described above, variation does exist in the extent of Beacon staff involvement in community endeavors, such as taskforces: 37% of directors reported staff as involved in such activities frequently, 43% said somewhat frequently, and 20% said not at all frequently; 20% of directors said Beacon staff served on neighborhood taskforces frequently, 50% said somewhat frequently, and 30% said not at all.

Community Service

A third way in which the Beacon contributes to the life of the neighborhood is through community service. Many Beacons engage local residents in activities, such as advocating with the parks department to renovate a public park or conducting a graffiti paint-out. As discussed earlier in the report, most Beacons sponsor community service projects involving youth, serving both a youth development and community improvement function. Almost three-fifths of Beacons (57%) reported involving youth in community service at least monthly. Adults are also involved in community service projects sponsored by the Beacon: one-third (32%) involve adults as part of the ongoing community service activities of the Beacon; one-third (35%) involve them two to eight times a year; and the final third (32%) involve adults in community service only once a year or less.

Community Advisory Councils

According to the DYCD contract, all Beacons should have a community advisory council that meets at least quarterly. Only four Beacons (10%) reported meeting fewer than four times a year, and nearly one-third (32%) reported that they met at least six times annually. Almost two-thirds of Beacon directors (65%) reported that at least half their members attended council meetings regularly.

All Beacons report having a connection to the broader community through the vehicle of their community advisory councils. More than two-thirds (69%) of councils include more than 10 members and typically include a diverse group of members: parents, teachers, youth, principals, and representatives from local churches, block and civic associations, service providers, police, and the community board. City council members serve on the community advisory council in their district in an ex officio capacity.

Some councils play a very active role in shaping Beacon activities and agendas; some play a strictly advisory role; and a small number of councils meet infrequently or not at all or play a very limited role. More than four out of five Beacon directors described the councils as playing an active role in shaping Beacon activities. The core of their work entails program planning and monitoring, although some councils also assume an active role in fundraising, outreach, and organizing special events.

The community advisory councils also help build productive working relationships among different organizations and sectors in the community. The council's meetings are a place where information is shared, referrals to one another's programs and services are made, and problem-solving about community issues, such as safety and housing, takes place.

Finally, because most members of the councils live or work in the community, they are uniquely positioned to serve as intermediaries between the neighborhood and the Beacon, reaching out for suggestions from and marketing the Beacon's services to diverse segments of the community as well as advocating for neighborhood priorities within the Beacon. As one council member noted, "You need to have someone on the outside to see what they [Beacon staff] cannot see."

Creating Social Capital

One aspect of the Beacon's community-building activities is the creation of "social capital"—new social networks and relationships among residents, Beacon staff, service providers, and other neighborhood leaders. These networks and relationships help build a sense of common interest and desire to take action to improve the community and the lives of the children and families who live there. Almost 70% of Beacon directors reported that the Beacon frequently "provides people in the neighborhood opportunities to get to know other residents that they might not otherwise meet," and 21% of directors said that this was somewhat true; only 7% said that this was not very true.

In focus groups, parents stated that involvement at the Beacon had increased their likelihood of talking to and helping people on the street:

> *We all know each other from the Beacon; then in the community we see each other and we help each other out.*
>
> *I see kids acting up and they see me; they know me from the Beacon. They will stop what they're doing and I know they feel bad about what they have done.*

Many participants also described the Beacon as fostering the sense of family, of belonging, and of safety that provides a foundation for individual, family, and community development:

We treat each other like family. In this union there's a lot of strength.

A lot of people are either on the street or watching television at home. But they come into the Beacon and they get a lot of help. There's more hope for a better, more positive future.

The Beacon also serves as a neighborhood intermediary, helping simply through its presence to connect the school and neighborhood residents more closely and through its convening and contracting functions to foster relationships among neighborhood organizations. Finally, many parents cited the availability of affordable afterschool programs at the Beacon as critical to their ability to work outside the home or to participate in job-preparation activities. This helps build the community's capacity to sustain working families and contributes in turn to their ability to participate in the economic life of the neighborhood.

Discussion

Data from the implementation study indicate that the Beacons subscribe to their community-building mission and undertake a variety of activities in order to operationalize it. Indeed, only two Beacon directors characterized their organizations as not very active in the community. The majority subscribed to the opinion that neighborhood residents frequently see the Beacon as trying to make the neighborhood a better place to live (73%) and as offering services that are responsive to their needs (87%). Site visitors shared this overall assessment but rated the Beacon's orientation toward the community as somewhat more mixed, as is shown in Table 6, based on the Beacon directors' responses to a series of questions about their activities in and with the local community.

Table 6. Assessment of the Beacon's Relationship to its Community

"How would you describe the orientation of this Beacon toward the community it serves?"	**%**
The Beacon's activities include an ongoing effort to improve the neighborhood served by the Beacon.	46
The Beacon's activities include occasional efforts to improve the neighborhood served by the Beacon.	34
The Beacon is physically located within the community and serves community residents but does not participate in community affairs.	20

Source: Site visitor evaluation summary forms

This variation is not surprising. In any large, multisite enterprise like the Beacons, implementation is likely to be mixed or uneven. All Beacons are charged with both the internal task of developing and delivering a rich array of programs and the external challenge of building relationships with the school and the community. For some Beacons, these two tasks are inextricably intertwined and viewed as part of the same whole. In others, they are viewed as different programmatic domains. As a result, there are some Beacons that appear to exemplify community-building practices and others whose connections to the surrounding community are much more tenuous. Community

advisory councils in some Beacons generate ideas and strategies for connecting the Beacon to the community; in others, they are more passive venues for sanctioning the Beacon's work. Some Beacons make significant contributions to the surrounding community in the form of ongoing cleanups, service provision, or problem-solving; others sponsor an annual community event or a one-time neighborhood beautification project.

Overall, the variation in the nature and prevalence of community-building activities across Beacons seems to be a function of implementation rather than of differences in mission. In the large majority of cases, Beacons have created safe environments for children and families and contributed to the perception of increased safety in the neighborhood immediately surrounding the Beacon. Whether the Beacon's other community-building work is episodic or ongoing, or broad or narrow in scope, it is clear that the potential for Beacons to play a significant role exists.

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I haven't seen another program like this. It's right here, with Hispanics and African-Americans running it, and we don't have to travel downtown for it. (Beacon adult)

One time I saw some kids writing graffiti and called them on it; I helped them wash it and they promised not to do it again. The other day that same group was playing basketball in the gym—they saw the Beacon open, and they came in from the streets. (Beacon adult)

This is a diverse community, but it is dense. We live on top of each other. The Beacon allows kids to interact in social and athletic events. (Beacon adult)

Years ago there were a lot of street problems. Now we're more involved in cleaning up and improving and we feel safer. (Beacon adult)

Every community should have a Beacon. It betters the quality of life. (Beacon adult)

Because I go to school and don't get out until after my children are done with school, I was extremely worried about what to do with my kids. When they offered the escort service, I was so relieved because my kids get picked up and can stay as long as they need. (Beacon adult)

VIII. Other Relevant Findings

This section of the report contains other important evaluation findings, including the relationship between the Beacons and their host schools; health and health-related activities at the Beacons; the role of YDI; and the role of the city in fostering the initiative.

Relationship Between Beacons and Host Schools

Because turning significant portions of the building over to a community-based organization runs counter to the standard practice of assigning principals complete control and responsibility for the school building, relationships between the principals and the Beacons have not always proceeded smoothly. In most schools, the principals welcomed the Beacons, albeit tentatively, knowing that their students needed more than the school alone could offer. In a few schools, however, the principals saw the Beacon as competitive with the school's existing afterschool offerings. In a few others, the principals were initially unfriendly to the Beacon because of a poor prior relationship with a community-based organization (either the one selected to operate the Beacon or another organization).

The most difficult issues encountered in the Beacon-school relationship have involved the mechanics and politics of sharing and maintaining space and preventing complaints from teachers. The Beacons rent space from the schools according to a complex agreement that sets standard rates for all outside organizations. The Beacon rental agreements include both permanent "dedicated space" where the Beacon has its office and stores it supplies, and "shared" space, such as classrooms and public rooms (e.g., the auditorium, cafeteria, gymnasium, and rest rooms) that the Beacon uses for activities during the afternoon, evening, and weekend. Although the space rental fees are billed monthly and paid directly by DYCD, each Beacon is allocated $50,000 annually for space and rental charges and must carefully monitor its rental bill and make space utilization decisions accordingly.

Principals must approve agreements about space and thus have considerable authority to limit access to the space the Beacons can use. While few principals use that authority in ways that severely limit the Beacon, four Beacons reported lacking access to private rooms appropriate for counseling sessions, and six Beacons described such small administrative quarters that the lack of storage space limited their ability to purchase and store equipment for their programs.

Maintaining the space and preventing complaints from teachers about classroom use is the second largest source of tension between the Beacons and the schools. All the Beacons have developed strategies to keep the space they use clean and undamaged to limit complaints from teachers. In a few cases, evaluators were told that the Beacons have had to resort to elaborate record-keeping to prevent schools from charging them with disorder and damage for which the Beacon was not responsible.

However, despite some tension between Beacon directors and principals over space issues, most have forged positive working relationships. Almost three-fifths of directors (59%) reported such relationships with the host school, with over a third (35%) reporting a "friendly working partnership"

with the principal of the host school and nearly one-quarter (24%) reporting "cordial communication."

Where Beacon and school had developed a strong working relationship, the principals had high praise for the contributions the Beacons made to their schools. They were particularly appreciative of the Beacon's assistance in helping organize parent-school activities, in helping school staff understand the cultural background of the children they served, and in improving the relationship between the school and the surrounding community, as the following quotes from principals illustrate:

> *The Beacon has brought in cultural programs to enlighten school staff about the students' background and history. This Beacon has built a whole different level of tolerance.*
>
> *The Beacon brings people to the school—both parents and community members—to take classes or even just pick up their kids. They walk through the building and get a different perspective on the school. People are starting to see the school as a resource.*

Similarly, despite occasional reports of uncooperative custodians, three-quarters of the directors (77%) reported they had a satisfactory working relationship with the custodian. This relationship is critical for two reasons. First, the custodian's cleaning services, when careful and thorough, can smooth the waters between the Beacon and the teachers. Several Beacons reported having youth or staff help the custodians to make sure that the facilities were kept clean. Second, the custodians have the keys to open the rooms rented by the Beacon. In one extreme case, a director reported that the custodian would open doors to rented classrooms but not to any of the bathrooms in the immediate vicinity. At the other end, one director reported that his school's custodian would allow the Beacon to use space not included in the original rental contract if needed, simply adding it to the monthly space charges.

YDI has focused some of its technical assistance sessions on fostering better relationships between the Beacons and schools by helping directors understand the schools' perspective and developing strategies and procedures for dealing with tension over space. In most cases, Beacon directors and staff have worked hard to develop and maintain a positive rapport with the host school but are sometimes frustrated at what they perceive as the absence of a reciprocal effort in many schools. Many Beacons have also taken an active role in serving not only the students attending the school but also the school itself. Almost three-quarters of Beacons reported at least occasionally offering joint activities with the school, often focused on building a strong parent association and improving the relationship between the school and the community. In 10 schools (25%), computer equipment purchased by the Beacon was available to the schools' students during class hours.[12] Two in five Beacon directors described their staff as participating in school committees or volunteering in the

[12] The Beacons were able to buy the computers with resources made available on a competitive grant basis by YDI, which had raised the funds from a private foundation.

school. More than one-quarter (28%) of directors reported that some of their staff were also employed by the school. One principal credited the Beacon not only with expanding the participation of parents but also with changing the nature of the relationship between families and teachers from an adversarial to a cooperative one.

Beacon directors have also sought to involve school staff in the operation of the Beacon. In addition to including the principal on the community advisory council, almost three-fifths (60%) of Beacons reported that school staff participated in their activities, and one in four (25%) Beacons reported that school staff volunteered in the Beacons. Two-thirds of the Beacons have hired school personnel to staff the afterschool academic activities and school staff have helped plan educational activities in more than one-quarter (28%) of sites.

In summary, despite some continuing (and perhaps inevitable) tensions around space issues, many Beacons have developed and maintained positive working relationships with their host schools. One particularly appreciative principal described the benefits of this collaboration:

> *The building is open in the evening and in the morning and on Saturdays, and it is open because of the Beacon. As a school, it is great for us because we can become a community center; we don't have to deal with fees or the complexity of opening the school, all that bureaucracy. We reap the benefits in a lot of ways. Parent participation and interest has been increased. Parents and children have become more of a part of each others' lives.*

Health and Health-Related Activities and Substance Abuse and Violence Prevention

Many Beacons have made connections with neighborhood resources and mobilized community institutions to offer an array of health, health-related, and prevention services and activities for children, adolescents, and adults, often in partnership with community providers. Together, these efforts provide added value to the educational and recreational components. Table 7 shows the range of health-related activities provided by the Beacons.

One rationale for creating Beacon programs was to address the substance abuse problems in many low-income urban communities. Based on the interviews with the Beacon directors, a significant proportion of Beacons offer substance abuse prevention activities (72%), drug counseling (56%), or on-site self-help groups (31%) such as Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous. Prevention activities are generally offered to children and adolescents, while treatment-related services more often target adults. As noted previously, a majority of the children and young people surveyed described the Beacons as very helpful in encouraging them avoid drug use. Eighty-five percent of Beacons also offered violence prevention and conflict resolution programs in addition to providing alternative activities, such as recreation, sports, or drama. This combination of activities appear to have contributed to the perception of the Beacon as a safe space within the community.

Beacon programs also address issues of nutrition and physical activity: 85% of programs distribute food to participants, 39% sponsor nutrition or cooking classes, and almost all have a physical fitness and sports component. These activities have the potential to address a number of important health problems, including obesity, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.

Table 7: Health-related Activities Offered by the Beacons
(N = 39)

Activity	# of Beacons offering	% of Beacons offering*	% offered by or in collaboration with other providers
Parenting classes	31	80	77
Parenting counseling	32	82	74
Nutrition/cooking activities	15	39	90
Food distribution	33	85	81
Aerobics/sports/physical fitness	37	95	72
Conflict resolution/ prevention	33	85	81
Rap groups on family or health issues	32	82	78
Sex education	29	74	80
Pregnancy prevention	27	69	82
HIV prevention	27	69	82
Drug counseling	22	56	88
Substance abuse prevention	28	72	80
Substance abuse self-help group	12	31	95
On-site mental health services by professional	17	44	92
On-site health services	11	28	97
Referrals for health or mental health	30	77	83
Special events related to health	30	77	88

* Includes activities sponsored by Beacon and/or partner.

Another major health concern for young people relates to sexual health issues. Close to three-quarters of sites offer sex education (74%), and over two-thirds (69%) offer pregnancy prevention and HIV prevention programs. In addition, more than four out of five Beacons (82%) sponsored regular discussion groups on family and health issues. Most of these activities targeted the adolescent members of the Beacons.

More than one-quarter (28%) of Beacons offer health services on site, and over two-fifths (44%) offer mental health services on site. Beacons also serve as important link to other health services. More than three-quarters (77%) provide referrals for health or mental health services, and four-fifths sponsored parenting classes or counseling for parents.

Health activities have provided Beacons with opportunities to develop significant partnerships with other organizations. In nearly a quarter of the Beacons, an outside health facility provides on-site services. In many cases, these services are the only such services available to children at the Beacons (or the school). Many programs use hospitals, health centers, and community-based service providers to supplement health-related activities on substance abuse, sexuality, and nutrition.

As in other areas, there is considerable variation among the programs in the breadth of health services offered. While nearly all programs include sports programs, food distributions and conflict resolution programs, fewer than half offer on-site mental or physical health services or substance abuse self-help groups. A possible priority for the future is to expand the quantity and quality of health-related activities offered by all Beacons.

The Role of the Youth Development Institute

The evaluation findings reflect the substantial contribution to the Beacons initiative made by the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York. With independent funding, YDI has provided ongoing support to the Beacons since 1992. The focus of the technical assistance has always been on articulating the vision of the Beacons and then bringing the vision and everyday reality closer. To do so, YDI has drawn on its own expertise in the field of youth development and community building, as well as that of outside experts and, most importantly, the practical experience and professional expertise of the front-line Beacon practitioners.

The different forms of assistance have included:

- monthly meetings of the Beacon directors that focus on the development of the Beacons concept and how it can be put into practice;
- linkages to resources, such as training for staff and opportunities for funding;
- professional development activities (e.g., workshops) for Beacon directors and staff;
- advocacy with public agencies to foster collaborative relationships with the Beacons; and
- small grants to help individual Beacons develop in specific core areas.

A special focus of YDI's technical assistance has been on expanding educational activities at the Beacons beyond homework help. Assistance in this area has included workshops and staff training to help Beacons develop educational enrichment opportunities, as well as a handbook on literacy-based afterschool programming and grants to enable Beacons to undertake thematically based youth activities. A special focus of YDI's technical assistance in literacy has been the use of themes for framing literacy activities.

Participation in YDI activities has always been completely voluntary. Two-thirds (66%) of the directors reported attending more than three-quarters of the YDI meetings, and close to three-fifths of directors (59%) reported participating in the professional development activities organized by

YDI. Two-thirds (68%) of directors also reported sending staff to YDI training opportunities. Almost all directors (95%) had positive views of YDI's assistance, with 57% describing it as essential to the success of the Beacons initiative and 38% describing it as very helpful.

Ongoing City Support

The New York City Beacons provides an excellent example of the "scaling up" of a targeted initiative to a comprehensive neighborhood improvement program. Crucial to this scaling up was the ongoing leadership and support, financial and otherwise, provided by New York City government under both the Dinkins and the Guiliani mayoral administrations. This support not only provided funds to allow the initiative to quadruple in size between 1990 and 1996, it also sent an important message to local-level practitioners about the importance of the initiative and the city's substantial commitment to developing the capacity of community-based organizations to provide opportunities for youth development and to address local community needs.

What began as an ambitious and comprehensive initiative in 10 sites became institutionalized in city policy, with its own assistant commissioner and a staff of contract managers who help the Beacons negotiate the complex contractual processes involved in renting space from schools and securing the services of literally hundreds of partner organizations. The Beacons has emerged as one of the major ways that New York City helps youth, families, and neighborhoods thrive. In 1998, city government doubled the funding for the Beacons, bringing the total to $36 million. This currently supports 76 Beacons; an additional four Beacons will be launched in 1999.

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People used to hang in the park near the school, smoking weed. We used to have to go and sweep the court of glass every day to play. Nothing like that happens anymore. (Beacon adult)

The Beacon helps youth interact with senior citizens. They stop and talk with us. It's helping to raise the level of respect for seniors in this community. (Beacon adult)

Family Night is a lot of fun and I learned things I can do at home with my kids. (Beacon adult)

The Beacon is a positive place because it's family-oriented, there's good communication between staff and kids. (Beacon adult)

IX. Conclusion

It is clear that the Beacons initiative as a whole has lived up to the expectations of its creators. As attested to again and again in our research, the Beacons have created safe havens for children and youth, and provided a whole range of much-needed services—academic, cultural, recreational—for children and families. They have also provided adults with a range of supports—ESL, GED, and citizenship classes, as well as afterschool child care—which have added to the foundation for economic well-being for many families and communities. Beacons have also fostered positive youth development, helped young people avoid risk behaviors, and fostered youth leadership. For thousands of families at risk of serious difficulty, the Beacons have provided foster-care prevention services in a nonstigmatized community setting. They have facilitated improved relationships between many host schools and their parent communities and helped families become involved in the education of their children and communicate with their children's teachers. Beacons have played a major role in many communities—fostering community pride through a range of activities and services that draw on community strengths and assets, address community problems, and bring residents together for problem-solving and celebrations.

Understandably, there is variation across the 39 Beacons studied as part of the first phase of the New York City Beacons evaluation. A small number of sites have implemented programs that fully develop the potential of the Beacon concept. The large majority of Beacons have strong or exemplary programs in one or two of the four areas and acceptable implementation overall. A few sites are still struggling to implement programs consistent with the rich conceptual Beacons framework. In some areas, Beacons have acknowledged the need for improvement and are working to strengthen their programs; other areas are being addressed by the ongoing technical support provided by both DYCD and YDI. Despite these variations, evaluation findings provide abundant evidence of the important role that Beacons are playing in many communities in New York City.

There is also much that we do not know about the Beacons programming and that was not within the purview of the research conducted during the first phase of the Beacons evaluation. In effect, this report revealed findings about the breadth of Beacon programming and the overall scope of the initiative. The intensive outcomes study of six Beacons will add to our knowledge of the depth of services and increase out understanding of how well the Beacons work in different situations and communities, of variations in the relationships with host schools, and of the key role of the lead agencies in creating and sustaining innovative approaches to youth development and community involvement.

In summary, it is clear that the Beacons initiative has fulfilled its promise of becoming a vital resource in many New York City communities, bringing together families, schools, and communities. As one parent so eloquently stated, "The Beacon is an oasis in this desert."

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